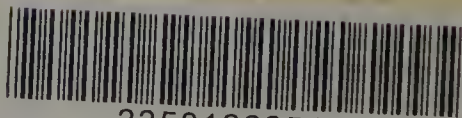


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# DR EDITH ROMNEY

A Nobel



*IN THREE VOLUMES—VOL. II.*

LONDON

RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON

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# DR EDITH ROMNEY.

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## CHAPTER I.

### MRS. LORIMER IS PERPLEXED.

MRS. LORIMER soon kept her promise regarding Sibyl. A call from Mrs. Lorimer was a distinction, a sort of local presentation at court. To do the people justice, they seldom waited for this official authorizing of a new-comer's introduction; still, the happy person who received the honour was entitled to warmer and more eager marks of attention.

The Fances, at least, had not been kept waiting. The claims of personal attractions supported by "money" are not long in receiving recognition from a just and discriminating circle. Fane's acquaintance would unquestionably have been sought through the fathers; Sibyl made it

possible for the mothers and daughters to come to the attack at once.

The Chutterworths called the day after the Milwards' "evening," and Dr. Fullagher coming in and seeing their cards, chuckled with great amusement.

"So you've had the great man's women along already," he remarked, stroking his flowing beard as he lay back in an easy chair and looked at Sibyl, slender, elegant, and bright-haired, a half-puzzled, half-laughing expression on her face.

"Yes," she said.

"They are awfully nice, don't you think?" said the doctor, insinuatingly.

"Mrs. Chutterworth seems kind," said Sibyl, biting her lip to keep back a laugh.

"Oh, there won't be any seeming, it will be all real," said Fullagher. "You speak with diffidence—come, tell me what you think. Of course I'm fond of them, but on my honour, I won't betray you."

"I feared you might! The mother is bearable, there is no nonsense and no pretension about her, but the daughters are terrible."

"They take after the father," said the doctor, gravely. "I don't think he'll have any reason to be disappointed in them. It's a pity, though, you think them terrible, for they will see much



of you. However, familiarity can soften even the awful, I believe, and you will certainly have abundant opportunities for getting used to them. They will soon discover you to be a congenial spirit. They will include you in the favoured ranks of their dearest friends. It's quite true," he added, with cheering encouragement, as Sibyl made an exaggerated gesture of dismay.

"Had I had any suspicion of this, I should certainly not have found courage to invade Wanningster," she exclaimed.

"Don't say that. Your coming was a happy inspiration."

She gave him a little mocking smile, thinking she detected an attempt at a compliment.

"Fact," said the doctor. "Oh, I don't mean it for a compliment; when I take to complimenting I shall think it about time to expect my last attack of gout. No; I am regarding the subject from a business point of view—from Fane's, you know. You make a bond of union between him and the outside world; you will receive the first shock of attack. I hope, Miss Fane, you have the faculty for friendship well developed and actively cultivated, for you will have many friends."

Sibyl surprised Mrs. Lorimer as much as she surprised the other people. She received the

great lady with the pleasant courtesy she showed to every one. She appeared in no degree conscious of any unusual honour being conferred upon her. Mrs. Lorimer accounted for this behaviour by the fact that she possessed money. What in a penniless girl would have been unpardonable presumption, was in a young lady of fortune charming ease of manner; and then, Miss Fane, being a stranger, must of course be ignorant of her caller's full claims to consideration.

Mrs. Lorimer drove next to the Rectory. She never attempted to patronise Mrs. Stanforth. The Rector's wife was the only person in the town she treated as she treated her London and county friends,—she was the last woman in the world to fail in respect towards the baronet-connection.

She soon brought in Dr. Fane's name by remarking upon Mrs. Stanforth's delicate appearance. Perhaps in her heart of hearts she was a little disappointed to find that the Rectory still remained faithful to Miss Romney, and that Mrs. Stanforth could tell her nothing about the brother and sister from her own personal knowledge. Mrs. Stanforth had not been able to call upon Miss Fane; but the Rector had called.

“And what did he think of her?” asked Mrs. Lorimer.

“Oh, he thought her very nice, I believe,” was the answer, made with languid indifference.

“You look far from strong,” said Mrs. Lorimer, unflinchingly regarding the wan face and bright eyes. “If I were Mr. Stanforth I should feel seriously alarmed about you. Have you thought of getting fresh advice?”

“Oh, dear no!” said Mrs. Stanforth.

“You are quite satisfied with Miss Romney’s treatment?” pursued the other, determined to hear something decided.

“Too satisfied to think of asking myself the question,” said Mrs. Stanforth, smiling. She was not as serene as she looked, however. Mrs. Lorimer’s questions, her dwelling upon the Fanes, her dropping of Edith’s title, roused into active life the uneasiness she had already expressed to Edith. It was not difficult to guess the drift of all this. Dissatisfaction had begun to work in her visitor’s mind. “Already—already,” murmured the invalid to herself, with an out-go of loving pity towards her friend. “Oh, I hope for *your* sake I shall get safely over my time.”

“The drawing-room is furnished very elegantly, especially for a professional man just

starting," observed Mrs. Lorimer, somewhat irrelevantly.

"They have money, you know."

This was exactly what Mrs. Lorimer wished to hear more about,—certain thoughts that had lately entered her mind, however, made her feel a delicacy in asking point-blank questions on the subject.

"Oh, indeed," she remarked, looking inquiringly at Mrs. Stanforth.

"Yes," said Mrs. Stanforth, listlessly. "He has a private income, I believe. I don't know much about it. My sister in London has friends who meet Miss Fane often in society, and she tells me she has a very handsome fortune of her own. She lives with a rich aunt, who will probably leave her money to them. Miss Fane is run after a great deal in consequence."

"Well, she is a lovely creature," said Mrs. Lorimer.

"Is she? Then her husband will be doubly fortunate. By-the-by, how is Violet?"

"Pretty well, thank you. She will be better when the country breezes have blown away the effects of London heat."

"Am I to congratulate you? or is it only rumour?"

"What about?"

“ Ah, I see it is. I heard she was engaged.”

“ Oh, no,” said Mrs. Lorimer quickly. She rose to go, and spoke with a faint attempt at a smile. “ Violet is difficult to please, you know.”

“ I think it’s the best thing a girl can be,” said Mrs. Stanforth.

Mrs. Lorimer got into her carriage with a cloud upon her brow. Violet’s engagement was a painful subject. She was not engaged, and she ought to be engaged, for she had had a very eligible offer of marriage two weeks ago. Her mother had greatly desired the match, and had been much chagrined when Violet told her she had refused the offer. The blow was a heavy one. Violet was twenty-five, and Mrs. Lorimer had hoped this last season to remove her shame in possessing an unmarried daughter of that advanced age. In the first moments of her disappointment she had forgotten herself so far as to betray the strength of her wishes on the subject—a fact which caused her some annoyance and regret to remember, especially as it was impossible not to remember at the same time the cold, hurt look in her daughter’s eyes.

“ Why did you refuse Mr. Temple ? ” she had demanded.

Violet slightly shrugged her graceful shoulders,

and replied, with a faint touch of disgust in her surprised,

“He isn’t quite a gentleman, mother.”

Mrs. Lorimer very nearly exclaimed, “Whatever does that matter?” She checked herself in time; but, when she thought of Mr. Temple’s country-seat and income, the objection did indeed seem trivial and inadequate.

This last was Violet’s sixth season, and their nearest country neighbour, a Mrs. Egerton, was now enjoying the felicity of preparing her daughter’s trousseau—a girl in her teens, who had conquered her destiny creditably, if not brilliantly, before the end of her first season. The contrast was too painful. And Miss Egerton was not pretty, was not graceful, as Violet was. Certainly some mysteries in the world were past finding out. It was easy for Mrs. Stanforth, whose daughters were in the nursery, to say a girl should be difficult to please. Such fastidiousness was a charm, no doubt, but one which rather stood in its own light.

So far her hopes for Violet’s future had centred in London. Like Mrs. Primrose, she might have said, “This I am assured of, that London is the only place in the world for all manner of husbands.” But when she saw Fane it appeared to her as if a chance lay at her very door. It was



a descent from her expectations six years ago, but time was precious, and, after all, a doctor with a large and wealthy practice—which Dr. Fane was sure to make—was not so very unsuitable a match for the daughter of a manufacturer, even though the letters M.P. were added to his name some few years before his death. Then, too, Dr. Fane's connections were good, and the stigma of being born and bred in Wanningster did not attach to him. He was not provincial. Mrs. Lorimer regretted the sacrifice, yet acknowledged the necessity of some sacrifice. Indeed, a girl so recklessly extravagant of the limited chances of a settlement as Violet, had no right to complain if, in preferring a husband who satisfied her standard of gentlemanhood, she sacrificed worldly position and greater wealth. Her fastidiousness would be hopeless if she found anything to object to in Austin Fane.

It must not be supposed that these thoughts passed coherently or consciously through Mrs. Lorimer's mind. Impressions influencing action may be as elusive as a forgotten air. It is not often that a person draws up a word-statement in his mind of the motives which are to actuate him, which he believes will actuate him. Compressing clouds into geometrical forms would be perhaps almost as easy.

“He shall come to the garden-party,” said Mrs. Lorimer. “He and his sister. But Violet has taught me a lesson; I shall not show any desire one way or another about him, and she will never suspect I can have any about a man who lives in Wanningerster.”

The garden-party at the Hall was a yearly event, and one, it is needless to add, of great importance. It was the one way in which the Hall showed hospitality to the town. Dinners were too great and peculiar an honour, except for the Stanfords; but the garden-party was an official gathering to which all Mrs. Lorimer's acquaintances were asked. This year she decided to have it a month earlier than usual, and invitations were accordingly sent out for the fifteenth of August.

When Mrs. Lorimer decided that the Fanes should be invited to her garden-party, her motives were as indefinite as an unfamiliar landscape seen through a shroud of morning mist. Her vexation at finding that her opinion was not considered binding, and that her lead was not invariably waited for; her growing suspicion that the course of events, instead of accepting her guidance, must control her own movements; and this vexation and suspicion in turn inclining her to dissatisfaction with Edith; the threatening

of Miss Romney's popularity shaking her own confidence—the exotie growth of an artificial and fleeting fancy—and reviving the prejudice of a life-long habit; her favourable impression of the Fanes, and her anxiety about Violet's future, an incipient uneasiness about Bertie—all these were inextricably entangled, and recognised by Mrs. Lorimer so slightly, that she found the explanation of her invitation in the very obvious one—that it needed no explanation at all. She invited the Fanes, as she invited the Milwards and Ardleys and Warrens—because they were townspeople, and in the particular set included in her patronage.

Bertie happened to saunter into his mother's sitting-room, when she and Violet were filling up the invitation-cards, and he looked over those scattered on the table with what his mother felt to be a too particular interest.

“I say, mother, you know lots of people in the town,” he remarked. Bertie, be it observed, had hitherto escaped the garden-party.

“Certainly I do,” replied his mother.

“It's a great bore,” said Violet, pushing away one card and taking up another. “What is the name of Miss Romney's niece, mother? Oh, Noel—take care, Bertie, it is wet.”

Bertie had taken up the card for Miss Romney.

A half-smile of satisfaction touched his lips as he saw that she was invited.

"Fane," he said, looking at another; "Miss Fane? Who is she?"

"The new doctor's sister," said Violet.

"Are you going to have *him* here?"

"We could hardly ask the sister without the brother," said Violet.

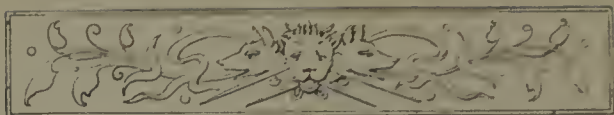
"But," and the young man hesitated and flushed slightly — "but do you think Miss Romney will like to meet him?"

"Miss Romney will not be asked," said Mrs. Lorimer in her deepest tones. "I cannot show favour to one person more than to another. I must make them all alike—to me they are all alike. I have called upon Miss Fane, and I cannot slight her by passing her over."

Bertie looked vexed and unconvinced, but he said no more. After all, his notion that Miss Romney might not like to meet Dr. Fane was but a vague one. He was a little disturbed to see that, for some reason or another, his mother showed an inclination to "turn against" Miss Romney; but as for any fear that her doing so might have unpleasant effects upon Miss Romney's practice—well, the thought never entered his head; and he had simply no conception of the importance to her of any such effect.

Indeed, had her practice melted away from her altogether, the young man would have considered it a fact for congratulation rather than for condolence. Though in experience still unripe, he had full share of the masculine distaste for feminine independence.

Bertie's championship, faintly expressed as it was, went further to clear the clouds of indecision from his mother's mind, and to release her from the weight of responsibility imposed by her own conviction of the importance of her action, than any consideration of the advantage of the Fanes' acquaintance. Scepticism about the marvellous is in some natures very deeply rooted, and it was so in Mrs. Lorimer's; yet she was beginning to fear she must believe that her son was in some degree attracted by Edith Romney. The gift of the rosebud suggested the first idea of danger to her. Next morning Bertie hung about the terrace during the young doctor's visit, and managed to get a few words with her when she left the house. Mrs. Lorimer had seen the young man pass the library window, and on slowly crossing the hall after Miss Romney had taken leave, she saw the two exchanging greetings within the frame of the open hall door. Familiarity did not make the wonder less wonderful, but it forced an unwilling uneasiness into the careful mother's mind.



## CHAPTER II.

### MONA ON LOVE.

MRS. LORIMER'S garden-parties always passed off well, and this year's was one of the most successful. The weather was fine, the grounds were delightful, the band played spiritedly, and the guests were honoured, and disposed to find everything charming.

Mrs. Lorimer herself was satisfied, on the whole. Violet had looked exceedingly pretty in her costume of pale blue and white, and Dr. Fane had appeared becomingly sensible of the fact. Miss Fane was bewitching enough to have turned as young a head as Bertie's at the first glance ; and certainly Bertie had been impressed, but not as deeply as his mother expected. As son of the house, of course his favours had to be distributed generally ; still it was a pity he had given so much time to pretty little Miss Noel, and that Oscar Ardley had engrossed Miss



Fane to the extent he did. But Mrs. Lorimer knew well that these cross arrangements could not be altogether avoided. She had rescued Bertie, and reminded him of his duty to more important guests, and later on she had been obliged to turn Dr. Fane in the path he should go—drawing him from the same young lady's side, and sending him to see the wood under Violet's guidance. Still, on the whole, she was contented with this beginning of the acquaintance with the Fanes; and, after all, it was perhaps as well that Miss Romney had not been able to come. People would know she had received an invitation; the presence of her niece was a sufficient proof of Mrs. Lorimer's impartiality of favour, for she was still anxious not to commit herself in regard to the rival doctors.

When told by Winifred that Miss Romney was unable to come, having been called out just before the time for starting, she had felt, it must be confessed, disagreeably surprised. Gentlemen, the rarer and more precious guests, it was understood were sometimes prevented by business engagements from mingling in scenes of social frivolity; but ladies, who were generally so plentiful—too plentiful, who could always be counted upon—for one of them to excuse her absence on the score of professional duty seemed

unnatural—almost wrong, and certainly presumptuous, when the party was at Bycroft Hall. Hospitality from the Hall was such a favour, so greatly valued by the recipient, so eagerly looked forward to, so anxiously prepared for, that it was impossible to understand a refusal to enjoy it on the part of one—a lady, too—who was honoured by its offer. This untoward occurrence went far to modify Mrs. Lorimer's views concerning lady-doctors.

"Miss Romney not able to come?" she said in a tone of astonishment to Winifred when the girl—who had come with the Milwards—made her aunt's excuses.

"She was called out—she was very sorry," repeated Winifred, colouring a little.

"Called out?" Mrs. Lorimer had no intention of hurting her young guest's feelings, and she had no idea of the disagreeable effect of her manner as she distinctly echoed the words, and regarded the girl with a cold, steady gaze. "Oh, of course—I see." She turned to greet the next arrival, and Winifred passed on.

"Miss Romney should have managed better," said Mona to her friend. "Mrs. Lorimer's frown has revealed to me the full enormity of her conduct—clearly, she should have her patients in better order. And that unhappy

person whose untimely illness has caused this neglect had better keep the secret all she can."

Winifred laughed, but her hostess's reception was not a pleasant beginning of the day's festivities; nor was the disagreeable opening made up for by any enjoyment later. The party to her was all disappointment and confused unhappiness.

Even the fifteen minutes' honour of young Lorimer's society did not gratify her as it should have done; and she was too engrossed in her own anxieties to notice the peculiar way in which he always contrived to bring the talk back to Edith, and the interest he appeared to take in her habits and likings. And she was as little pleased by Dr. Fane's attention, which was as quietly-flattering as the handsome and attractive man could make it. Winifred did not feel at all graciously disposed towards the accomplished new-comer. She had seen the cordiality of Mrs. Lorimer's welcome, and the warmth of some other people's greetings. Dr. Fane had been much smiled on. This made her resent his efforts to please her. She smiled at his amusing remarks reluctantly, and as if under protest. Her cold reserve added a piquant element to her prettiness, which doubled her charm, and caused Fane to regret Mrs. Lorimer's

early rescuing. He put himself under Miss Lorimer's guidance with courteous alacrity, however, quite aware that he had been wasting time over an unprofitable amusement, and that Violet's was a more prudent acquaintance.

Winifred saw them go with relief. She was rapidly growing very heart-sick. Oscar, her own especial knight, whose devotion she had learned so to depend on that she never felt neglected in society, had apparently no remembrance of her existence. She had seen him only once since Mona's "evening"—he had called a few days after; but the call had given Winifred no gratification. He had been constrained and ill at ease, and she had felt, in consequence, wretchedly uncomfortable. This afternoon he had joined her and the Milwards after they were passed on by their hostess. Then the Fanes appeared—he had looked, hesitated, forgot what he was saying, made an effort to keep his eyes upon her, Winifred, and to remain by her—an effort which had cut the girl cruelly to the quick, and caused her to bow hurriedly and then hasten after Mona. After that she saw Oscar and Sibyl strolling together towards the tennis lawn.

Louisa Chutterworth saw her sitting alone, and came and threw herself on the same seat.

Louisa's smile was triumphant. "Alone!" said she. "Well, you mustn't mind. It's more amusing at the tennis lawn, though—that is, if you like to watch flirtations. But perhaps you don't?" with a laugh.

"It depends on how they are conducted," said Winnie.

"Depends on the people, I should say," said Louisa, laughing still more. "Young Mr. Ardley is conducting his at express speed. Any one can see it's an old affair between him and Miss Fane. You know he knew her in London, and I believe it is all over with him. So you see we old friends needn't be surprised at being forgotten."

Louisa added a rhapsody about Miss Fane's attractions, and then left Winifred and joined a friend.

Winifred sat for a moment, tingling from head to foot with horror at the insinuation contained in Louisa's words—she was to be pitied as deserted. It was a painful experience to poor sensitive Winnie—profane eyes had discovered her sacred secret; a profane hand had dragged it forth to the light, and profane lips had laughed. She had never dreamed of her slight being known to outsiders—it stung her to recognise that it could hardly be otherwise—but, at least, she had it in her

own power to show that she did not consider herself slighted. She sprang up, and catching sight of Reginald Milward a little distance off, walked with quick steps and high-held head towards him.

"Mr. Reginald, where is Mona?" she asked, gaily.

"Playing tennis. Won't you play too?"

"That is exactly what I want to do. You might have asked me before!"

"So I might," said Reginald; "and so I would have done, only I thought you were being looked after by Lorimer, and would scorn such a humble companion as myself."

"I prefer humble companions," said Winifred. "I don't like to be quite eclipsed by another's brightness. The effect is demoralising."

"How?" asked Reginald, with serious and eager interest.

"Well, if one feels sure one has no chance of shining, one gets despairing, and stops trying; and isn't a state of apathy considered lowering to human nature?"

"Well, you know," began Reginald, in measured accents, "ambition is no doubt a good thing in moderation—lofty ambition, that is—but I often think there is too much of the ignoble sort of emulation amongst us. Every



one wants to be richer, greater, and more important than his fellows. We want to have more than we can work for—there's a frightful amount of the usuring Jew in even the honestest of us. There are plenty of preachers of worldly wisdom—it is a pity an apostle of content can't rise and keep the balance more even."

"There is a career for you," cried Winifred. "If you will take it up I shall ask you to convert me for your first disciple." There was a ring of hard excitement in the soft young voice.

Content was far from her for many days after the garden-party. She went about as usual, although her ordinary occupations had lost their power of interest, and she took special care to try and look as usual—she was jealously anxious not to appear as the disappointed maiden. She could not understand Oscar's conduct; but she no longer attempted to explain it, or to make excuses for it. She felt that she was being treated badly by him, and what was hardest of all, that his strange behaviour had changed her love from a cause for pride into a cause for shame. It was unfair; he had sought her till she loved him, and now he had put upon her the necessity of struggling against her love as a thing to be ashamed of. At times, indignation

burned so hotly within her that it seemed as if the struggle would be short, if sharp; at others, she could only give way and pray for strength to endure.

She was sitting one afternoon, about a week after the party, going over and over the same weary round of thought when Mona was shown in.

Mona looked in wilder untidiness than usual as she hurried forward with an impetuous step.

"I'm in dreadful trouble," she groaned, without any preface of greeting, and she threw herself into a dejected attitude upon the hearth-rug.

"Oh, dear, I'm very sorry," said Winifred, not as alarmed as she would have been had any one but Mona made this doleful announcement. "What is it?"

"Papa is going to be married," muttered Mona, with downcast head.

"Oh!" cried Winifred. Mona had certainly not exaggerated this time. "Oh, Mona dear, I *am* sorry!"

"Yes, I knew you would feel for me," said Mona, her voice a little tremulous. "Isn't it horrible?" she added in more of her ordinary tone.

"Horrible, most horrible!" Winnie felt tempted to reply with fervour, but restrained

herself to a heartfelt expression of sympathy. It was very hard upon the girl, still it was not easy to say frankly how hard she thought it without blaming the father.

“Who is it?” she asked, in an awed voice.

“That’s the worst part of it!” exclaimed Mona. “You will never guess who it is. If papa had chosen some one suitable in age and education, half the sting would be left out. It’s—oh, Winnie!—it’s that odious Miss Robinson, the tailor’s daughter. I know what you must think,” she went on hurriedly, colouring as she saw the almost incredulous dismay which rushed into Winifred’s eyes. “Never mind, don’t trouble to try and say anything pleasant, because the subject is hopeless. There is nothing pleasant to be found in it. The question is, what am I to do?”

“What can you do? You cannot prevent the marriage.”

“Oh no, I am not ambitious for a villain’s part. Besides, I have more consideration for papa’s happiness—that is his own word, Winnie dear, not mine—than he has shown for mine. No; I mean what is my own private course of action to be?”

“You must put up with it, I suppose.”

“So very likely! I can’t hinder papa from

making himself the laughing-stock of the town—oh, how people will despise him!—but I am not going to live in the same house with them. Neither will Reginald. He swears by all his gods that he will go to the colonies—not all at once, you know,” said Mona, relapsing into flippancy, “probably only one at a time. The vagueness of the term gives a width and sublimity to his purpose which could certainly not be given by the name of one particular place. But the wretch refuses to let me go with him; politely says he can’t be hampered by a girl, and that my place is to stay dutifully at home. He’s as natural as life, is Reginald. Don’t you think,” said Mona, musingly, “that masculine inconsistency is something unutterably perfect? We are inferior creatures—granted. I’m sure I have no longing to be equal to such small deer as the lords of creation, and yet all the hard duties, the sacrifices, and disagreeables, are to be laid upon our weak shoulders. Regie’s proud spirit rebels against a stepmother, and he rushes off at once; but I, upon whom by far the heavier share of the unpleasantness will fall, must stay meekly at home! And papa is equally life-like. He is only absorbed in his ‘happiness’—Heaven save the mark! The brillianey of his prospects makes him quite poetical, and he goes into senti-

mental rhapsodies about the 'Garden of Eden,' into which he and his beloved are about to penetrate. Well, they may enjoy intercourse with as many serpents as they like in their paradise, but they won't find Reginald or me. 'I'll meet the raging of the skies, but not a married father.' 'The world is all before me where to choose,'" said Mona, mangling her quotations with a blood-curdling ruthlessness, "and I think it must be Jack Chutterworth after all."

This climax was startling, to say the least.

"Mr. Jack!" exclaimed Winifred, in unmistakable amazement. Then she leaned forward and spoke with earnest entreaty, "Mona, dear, don't do anything rashly. Pray don't let the shock of—of this make you take such a very serious step without consideration."

"Oh, I've known it for a week. I have been considering ever since, and I think a week is a dreadfully long time;" and Mona ruffled her light untidy hair. "I never knew one pass so slowly."

"But," said Winifred, aghast, "but do you—care for Mr. Chutterworth?"

"I should have a carriage," was the irrelevant rejoinder. "I have always longed for a carriage. And Mrs. Milward won't have one. At least, if papa *does* buy her one, when he didn't for me, I

shall—I shall consider it the lowest depth of meanness.”

Mona spoke with unusual energy, and hugged her knees viciously.

“Never mind. She has not got her carriage yet.”

“But she will get it, and I mean to have mine first. If I marry first she will have all the wholesome discipline of a Mordecai at the gate. I have laughed at Jack’s two offers, but judicious encouragement will make him make me another, and then I won’t laugh. He’s an awfully faithful fellow, and I think his faithfulness ought to be rewarded.”

Winifred was not struck as forcibly as her friend by this view of the beauty of justice, and she did not know what to say.

“Care for him?” repeated Mona, speaking in a tone half-contemptuous, half-discontented. “You mean what’s called love, I suppose? I don’t think I have vitality enough for the passion; it would be too fatiguing and boring for daily life, and not as pressing a necessity, you must admit, as having enough to live on. I don’t even think I believe in it. Jack would be an extremely wearying person if he were as infatuated as papa is about his ‘beauteous Adelaide,’—I quote her lover’s phrase. Oh, no;

a mild liking is far nicer," she said quickly. "Fancy the trouble of worrying oneself if a man did not come home at his usual time! 'Them's my h'opinions, and you're welcome to the use of 'em,' as I once heard the generous and courteous Joel observe."

Winifred laughed a little nervously.

"You don't think he is altogether objectionable, do you, Winnie?" asked Mona, stroking the cat.

This was truly a delicate question.

"I think he is very good-natured."

"Absurdly so," said Mona. "But he is not beautiful. And he is plainest in profile. He would make an abominable silhouette."

"They are out of fashion, you know; and he need not be photographed in profile," said Winnie encouragingly.

"My dear, he shan't be—if it takes two policemen to prevent it. I'll take good care he never goes alone to a photographer's, because I fear he is a little vain, and I have often noticed that when plain people *are* vain—it happens so seldom that the fact is not generally known—they are vainest about the beauty of their chief defect. 'This was some time a paradox, but now the time—that is, the lover—gives it proof,' quoted Mona, glibly. "There was a family gathering



at our house last evening," she explained. "The bride-elect, Robinson *père* and *mère*, and an indefinite number of their smaller olive-branches, and papa read some of 'Hamlet.' Poor man! he is naturally anxious to make as much progress as possible in preparing his Eve's mind for the enjoyment of her Adam's cultivated society, for it is certain no 'affable archangel' will take the task of schoolmaster off his hands."

"She is not very well educated then?" said Winnie, hesitatingly.

"Not exactly," said Mona. "That is to say, I should not describe her as being so unless I wished to speak as candidly as a testimonial. Instructing her will be a new and exciting interest in papa's days—it will renew his youth like the eagle's."

Edith entered the room then. Mona rose from her crumpled-up attitude on the hearth-rug, and shook hands sedately.

"I hope your day's work is over, Miss Romney. Are you not very tired?" she asked, as Edith sat down.

"I am a little," said Edith. "I am glad to see you have been cheering up Winnie's loneliness."

"I did not come to cheer, but to be cheered," and with this dark utterance Mona subsided again on the hearth-rug.



"That sounds rather melancholy," said Edith.

"It sounds as I feel then. Please feel my pulse, Miss Romney," stretching out a thin, limp hand.

Edith leaned forward, and mechanically did as she was asked. "What is the matter?" she said.

"Isn't agitation — unpleasant agitation, you know—bad for one's health?" said Mona, in appeal.

"Have you and Winnie had a dispute about it?"

"No. Why don't you ask if I have been unpleasantly agitated?"

"Ah, I see what you want. Tell me then if you are disturbed in any way?"

"I am disturbed in every way, and if I am ill, for I see you regard me anxiously, doctor—if I am ill, it will be all papa's fault. He is going to be married."

"Then it is true?" said Edith. "I heard at two houses to-day that he was engaged to Miss Robinson, but——"

"But you couldn't believe it? Don't mind me—I'm hardened. After all, it looks better for papa that people should be astonished, than if they had awarded Miss Robinson to him as being the only likely woman for him."

"I am very sorry for your sake, and for your brother's," said Edith, with gentle earnestness.

Mona kissed the hand which her own fingers had closed over in clinging fondness. "Of course you are going to the Women's Rights meeting next week?"

"Why of course?"

"Well, when you ask me that, I really don't know why—only it seems to be the general impression about you, as you are a doctor. You are expected to be the leading spirit of the affair—a sort of local authority on the subject."

"If they knew how little I know about it!"

"Don't go," exclaimed Mona. "Don't go, Miss Romney—you will disappoint them all, then! What do you think that odious Dr. Fane said the other day?"

"What did he say?" asked Winifred, quickly.

"Oh, there was some talk about this meeting, and he laughed—the wretch has a talent for sneering, I believe—and said you were sure to be there; it was too good an opportunity for a lady-doctor to exhibit her laurels to be lost. As a piece of what is termed feminine spite, I think that speech would take honourable rank. Don't you, Winnie?"

"I don't see why he should be spiteful," said Winnie, indignantly.

“Well, of course *he* doesn’t describe his feelings by that word. Oh, dear no! He only feels the disgust which every right-feeling man feels when a woman is so lost to every sense of delicacy and propriety as to follow one of their professions. It shows——”

“Oh, Mona, what are you saying?” cried Winifred.

“Not what *I* think,” exclaimed Mona, glancing quickly from one to the other. “Pray believe me! I was only quoting——”

“What Dr. Fane said?” inquired Edith.

Mona nodded. “Wasn’t it odious of him? I was so angry with him! I think I showed him that that was not the way to win *me*, however it might succeed with papa. But I must go,” she said, getting up.

Winifred accompanied her to the door and then returned to the drawing-room, where Edith stood, gazing out with knitted brows and pale cheeks.

“Isn’t it dreadful about Mr. Milward?” said Winnie. “How can a man do such a thing? Mona declares she will accept young Clutterworth. I am quite disappointed—I thought better of Mona.”

“I suppose,” said Edith, speaking slowly, and in a hard voice unlike her own, “I suppose

women who make such marriages as Miss Robinson and Mona Milward, show more womanliness and delicacy than a woman who enters the medical profession."

Winifred was dismayed to hear Edith speak bitterly. She went quickly and put her arm round her aunt's waist.

"Ah, you are vexed about that horrid speech Mona repeated," she said.

A burning blush rose slowly and covered Edith's face and brow. She averted her head as a person might who is ashamed.

"Oh, I am so sorry," exclaimed Winifred, in heartfelt accents. "I wish Mona had held her tongue! But, auntie dearest, why should you mind? He does not know you—it is only what some men do say about lady-doctors."

"Yes, of course. I know it is absurd to think twice about it—only it sounded like an accusation. And such an accusation for a woman! How can a man—how dare a man say such things about women?"

"I'm sure I don't know. It seems to be the fashion—the latest development of chivalry; it is very strange," said Winifred, thoughtfully. "Men do say very nasty things about us now."

"Well, never mind, dear," said Edith, kissing

her. "I shall get hardened in time, even to Dr. Fane's enmity."

It may seem strange, perhaps, that the hardening process should not have been perfected months, or even years ago. The fact is, however, she had heard more of the world's chatter and opinions about her position since Fane's arrival, than in all the years of her training and practice, and she had certainly listened more attentively than she had done before. During her father's life she had heard little of the talk there is, when a woman chooses work out of the usual course prescribed for her. Her father's reserved, shy temperament, made him dislike visitors and visiting, and her mother's delicate health obliged them to live very quietly. It is true, both her brother Hugh and her brother-in-law had expressed disapprobation; but the disapprobation had been easily laughed at in her flush of eager longing and her innocence of its being, not merely personal, but an expression of public opinion. In those girlish days, it must be confessed, her feeling towards both brother and brother-in-law partook more of careless, good-natured contempt than of reverence. She and Hugh never suited each other; he was morbid, precise, conventional; she was ardent, vigorous, and not a bit morbid. Nor had Dr. Romney much sympathy

with his son. He regarded Hugh's crotchets with a mixture of amusement and contempt, and Hugh himself as an object for tolerant pity, on account of lack of vitality and weakness of constitution. Edith was quick to detect as much, and feel accordingly. Hugh's expostulations on the subject of her career, therefore, were naturally put into the same category with his remonstrances against her learning Latin and physiology. If her father approved of what she chose to do, she cared for nothing her brother or any outsider might say—so she had thought and felt in her youthful, loving arrogance.

But now she was finding out the full significance of her unusual choice. It was not the simple personal matter it had appeared. She chose her work, and lo, a clamorous chorus was heard around her. She had, it seemed, taken part in a most momentous struggle. She received reproaches and opprobrium on one side : on the other, a loud praise as hard to bear. A small section of the world claimed her as a bright ornament, a distinguished champion of the great cause of women's rights ; but by far the greater part denounced her as unwomanly, and a person to be pitilessly chastised by scoffing and rebuffs. And after all, she had never thought of her sex's rights or wrongs, when she did what brought all

this upon her. Even when carrying all before her, helped, flattered, and unopposed, as in those two first years, she was constantly and painfully being reminded that she had done an unusual, and therefore—a natural sequence to many—a most unfeminine thing. A hundred and one trifles pointed this out. Because she was a woman, she was to be kept conscious of the boldness of her deed; they would not leave her in peace to do the work she loved and felt most fitted for.

Still these things had been merely trifling annoyances, when she was gaining patients so rapidly; they bore a deeper, keener significance now, when she had lost some families, and was greeted on all sides with the same story, the same prophecy—a prophecy which grew bolder every day, and affected Edith like an unescapable fate.

She was realising, too, that her womanhood was more than a one-sided drawback to her career. Young Lorimer's admiration had become evident even to her. He almost always contrived to see her, and to exchange a few words with her in the garden. The morning after Mona's call he joined her in the drive, as she was leaving the Hall, and walked with her to the gate. His looks of admiration, his undisguised

attempts at compliment and flirtation, and his self-complacency withal—the complacency of a young sultan well aware of his condescension—would have amused Edith, had she not grudged the price which in all probability she would be called upon to pay for Bertie's pleasure. As it was, she replied briefly and coldly, and drove away feeling chafed and disgusted. His fancy endangered his mother's goodwill towards her, and no doubt the deluded young man considered that his admiration more than made up for the comparatively insignificant loss of a good patient.







## CHAPTER III.

### TALK.

. . . "I but did the deed,  
Being moved to do it."—*Spanish Gypsy.*

EDITH drove on to the Cottage, and entered Miss Jacques's little drawing-room with knitted brows. This was not a professional call, as her friend perceived, and the motive for it came out at once, for Edith went direct to the point, her natural simple sincerity being no doubt helped by her training and the busy nature of her life.

"I came to ask your advice," she said. "I had a note from Miss Harrison just before I started. There is to be a meeting in the Assembly Rooms next Thursday——"

"Oh yes, I know," said Miss Jacques, nodding. "It was not for nothing that Mrs. West gave me a whole hour of her time yesterday evening. I know all about it—the Liverpool delegate's name and appearance, the colour of the dress and bonnet she wore at her last meeting, who is to take the chair, the probable

speakers, and several other little details. I have been pressed to attend, and you of course are invited. Is it not so ? ”

“ Miss Harrison urges me to do so most warmly.”

“ Well, my dear, go, if that form of amusement presents attraction to you. There will be plenty of amusement to be got out of it, I assure you, provided you take the speakers and their speeches in the right way. You know you are a great feather in their cap. They will be very proud of you, and give you a capital place—indeed you may even be asked to ‘come up higher,’ literally, that is, on to the platform.”

“ I have been asked already. That is exactly what Miss Harrison is so anxious about.”

“ Well, my dear,” said Miss Jacques again, “ I suppose your sympathies are with them, and you will be glad to help the great cause.”

“ But I know so little on the subject : I have thought too little about it. If I went I should find nothing to say, and indeed I could not speak in public.”

“ And yet you have *done*,” said Miss Jacques, purposely incredulous ; “ you have done what they only talk about ! You have achieved emancipation, while they only dream and long for it ! ”

Edith got up and leaned against the mantelpiece in grave perplexity.

"No," she said; "there is some mistake. They and you too, Miss Jacques, do not understand me. I had no thought of any of these serious questions when I chose my profession. I cannot accept their admiration for what I have not done. I cannot present myself as a champion of their cause, and exhibit my success for encouragement."

"Don't you wish their cause success and encouragement?"

"I? Yes, I think I do; but I should like it better if done in another way. To tell you the truth, I do not like this antagonism between men and women. I don't think it is quite nice."

"Then you don't look upon your sex as oppressed at all, for surely if women have not their full rights, they must be in antagonism to those who withhold them?"

"I have thought too little on the subject. I can only speak for myself. I chose to be a doctor because I wanted real, true, and useful work to do, and because a doctor's life seemed to me to be one of the noblest and most useful, and, for me, the most suitable. I had no idea then of all the talk and clamour there could be about such a simple thing."

“Exactly so. You thought it quite simple—quite a matter-of-course; that a woman has only to choose her profession, and quietly pursue it. But it is just because the thing is not simple or easy at all that all the fuss is made. And ordinary women are so aware of this, they shrink so from the clamour and opprobrium which such a strong-minded course would bring upon them, that they dare not choose a calling. It needs exceptionally strong and independent natures to make such a tremendous break from the line ascribed us, or some one as divinely earnest and single-hearted as you are, and must have been. Things *are* improving—slowly. But women’s choice of work is still unjustly limited; and harassing annoyance and ridicule are still the portion of those who venture into any profession but the over-stocked and badly-paid one of teaching, or of menial companionship. Not,” she added, quickly, “that the conventional pursuits bring credit and respect! We tame followers of custom are scarcely better off than our more daring sisters in those respects. Work for bread implies loss of caste to us all alike, and it will do so until several old-fashioned fictions are done away with. You, who have dared, and can appreciate so keenly the value and delight of honoured usefulness, you must

surely admit the advisability of women's path being made smoother? You would like to feel that young women could be enabled to pursue their chosen careers, unharassed by the small-minded annoyances they have to put up with now?"

"Yes, indeed!" exclaimed Edith, heartily. "Why should they not?"

"Ah, why indeed! That is the natural question of one whose mind is not befogged by conventional prejudices—the natural expression of surprise at an evident injustice, and is to my thinking more eloquent than hours of speech-making from avowed partisans."

"Ah, you are laughing at me!"

"No, I am not. In all seriousness I say it. I think it would shame men a little—at least, it ought—to hear such an involuntary protest against their monopolies. If you considered the question for two minutes you would find plenty to say; and you owe it to your less fortunate and less courageous sisters to add your testimony in their favour. You asked my advice," explained Miss Jacques; "but I suppose it is as unpalatable as most advice—asked or unasked."

"I can't say it is palatable," said Edith, smiling. "It seems cowardly to shrink from saying what I might say," she added, musingly.

"It is strange you should shrink after going through your curriculum," said Miss Jacques, with wilful persistence, leaning back and surveying the tall, finely-formed figure, and grave, thoughtful face. Edith looked up quickly and laughed.

"My curriculum did not include public speaking, please remember. Indeed, had I had any idea that it ranked among a doctor's duties, I fear the dread of it would have kept me out of the profession."

"Not it," said her friend, bluntly. "You are made of stronger stuff. Why, my dear Miss Romney, after hearing what is said on our side, you will be full of enthusiasm. You will forget your reluctance and make an eloquent, enthusiastic speech, and your face and voice, and the light in your eyes will convert even scoffing man—should any of those noble beings chance to be present."

Edith only smiled absently at this.

"You say 'our side,'" she said. "I did not know before to-day that you went in for Women's Rights."

"Well, I do, and for men's too," said Miss Jacques, drily. "I am strictly impartial. I don't take extreme views. Don't class me with Miss Harrison."

Edith moved to go.

"Busy this morning?" inquired Miss Jacques. She longed to know how many had gone over to the enemy, as she termed Fane, but would not ask, for Edith looked more cheerful than when she first came in, and her friend did not wish to bring back the little frown.

"I am rather busy. I must indulge myself no further in talk just now. Thanks for the advice."

"I shall come to the meeting—I wouldn't miss your speech for anything. My fervent hope is that Dr. Fullagher and his friend will be present."

"Indeed, I hope not," said Edith, decidedly.

"Oh, the old misogynist would behave himself—he would not disturb the proceedings by brawling," said Miss Jacques, laughing. "If curiosity, and a malicious delight in quizzing, do lead him there, I only hope I may be fortunate enough to be able to watch his face."

"You ought to be one of the speakers."

"I! I have no laurels to exhibit. I am a failure."

"You are as bad as Dr. Fane!"

"In what way?"

"He used exactly the same expression about laurels," and she added what Mona had repeated the day before.

“Of course,” said Miss Jacques, with a fine blending of contempt and indignation in her tone; “he is sure to rail against you. That is the tritest commonplace of those who run down women. He would not be a man, not to mention a rival, if he were above that little spurt of spitefulness. When will the superior sex learn a more excellent way of proving their superiority than by constant aggressive assertion of it? They want us to worship them as heroes, and they refuse to allow us any right to be heroines!—except in the humble exercise of self-denial and patience, and of unlimited faith in their perfections.” She cast a quick, shrewd glance at Edith, and added, with a curious little smile of amusement, “And those hackneyed remarks distressed you, I suppose?”

“I was foolish enough to be annoyed,” she acknowledged.

“Well,” said Miss Jacques, deliberately, “if Dr. Fane values an undisturbed complacency he must not venture within reach of me.”

“Do you think you could affect his complacency?”

Miss Jacques nodded, her eyes twinkling. “You are improving, Miss Romney. I always considered myself a good teacher: now I find that I have underrated my gifts.”



"You don't give me credit for much natural aptitude!"

"I give you none—for wickedness. Disturb a man's complacency! Has *any* one accomplished such a feat? Well," as Edith laughed and shook hands, "I must let you go. I shall not forget the meeting."

Miss Jacques kept her promise. She heard no speech from Edith, however, for shortly before the meeting a message came from the Rectory, summoning her in haste.

Next morning at breakfast Fane unfolded the 'Advertiser' with a malicious expectation of amusement.

"Let us see how the shrieking sisters distinguished themselves last evening," said he, glancing over the headings of the different paragraphs. "Ah, here we are. 'Large and successful meeting,' &c."

Sibyl, sitting opposite, and dawdling over her breakfast, watched her brother as he read, a mischievous smile touching the corners of her lips. She had not seen him on her return from the Assembly Rooms last night, as he had stayed late next door, and to his question this morning, "Well, how did the crazy meeting go off? Was the great Miss Romney very bumptious and terrible?" she had merely replied, "Oh, it

was quite successful, I believe. Every one seemed to think so."

Fane turned, therefore, with scoffing curiosity to see what the 'Advertiser' said on the matter. He glanced over the preliminaries, chair-taking and the rest, very slightly; he was chiefly interested in learning how his rival had comported herself, feeling beforehand the disgust which her violent strong-mindedness would bring upon him.

"Miss Harrison in the chair, of course. Among those on the platform, Mrs. Albert Jones, the Liverpool delegate, Miss Milward—the very thing to delight that girl—Miss Fane—Sibyl. how could you mix yourself up with such a set?"

"It was better than sitting alone in the audience," said Sibyl, serenely; "Miss Harrison was so earnest about it."

"It is a wonder she didn't ask you to *speak*."

Just then the doctor knocked and walked in. Sibyl sprang up to greet him. He shook his head at her, an unusual gloom in his expression: and she laughed and put her finger on her lip.

"Hush," she whispered. "Don't say anything—he doesn't know yet."

Fane rose, paper in hand, to greet his friend.

"Don't let me interrupt you. You have

some very improving reading there," said Dr. Fullagher, sinking into an easy chair.

"I suppose you have seen the account?" Fane said.

"Yes, I've seen it," was the gloomy answer.

Sibyl looked at him with arch deprecation, and put her hands together in mute entreaty. But the pretty pantomime did not soften the severity of the doctor's countenance. He again shook his head and frowned.

Fane suddenly laughed over his reading.

"Very good!" he exclaimed. "Listen to this. 'Miss Harrison then read a note from Dr. Edith Romney, expressing regret at her unavoidable absence, as she was, at the moment of starting, called to an important case, and earnest good wishes for the cause which had brought them together.' Capital!" he said, sarcastically. "She is no fool, Fullagher?"

"She ought to be," growled the doctor.

"She has more idea of humbugging the public than I gave her credit for," said Fane. "There is something finely dramatic in sending such a message. It would do more good as an advertisement than any dozen speeches. Really, it shows genius."

"Do you mean to say," cried Sibyl, "that you don't believe she was called out?"

"Clap-trap," said Fullagher, curtly.

"Of course," assented Fane.

"If I were you, Miss Sibyl," said the doctor, significantly, "I would say little. *Your* turn is coming."

She laughed, and threw her head back with a saucy gesture of defiance.

"You might be sceptical, you two," said she, disregarding this friendly caution, "if you did not know she has plenty of success to boast of—"

"Clap-trap," repeated Fullagher, aggressively.

"But when she has a large practice it seems more natural to believe the excuse was real."

A smile flitted over Dr. Fullagher's face, and he stroked his beard contentedly. "Ah," he murmured, "her large practice is growing smaller every day."

Sibyl was silent and thoughtful for a minute, looking into her cup. "Do you know, I feel more sympathy for her than perhaps I ought to feel, as her loss means Austin's gain. I feel quite sorry when I think of the poor thing losing bit by bit what she has gained."

"I can quite believe that," said the doctor, emphatically. "After last evening such an assertion is superfluous in my opinion."

"Oh, there is something very sad about it!"

said Sibyl, with absent, serious gaze. Then she turned to Dr. Fullagher. "Have you ever seen her?"

"Heaven forbid!" was his fervent rejoinder.

"I wonder what she is like," she mused.

Her musings were cut short by a sudden exclamation from Fane. The old doctor and Sibyl exchanged glances.

After the report of Mrs. Albert Jones's eloquent speech, and one or two shorter ones, came the words—"Miss Fane then rose and said—"

"Good heavens!" muttered Fane, flinging down the paper in disgust.

"What do you think of that?" asked the doctor. "I looked in to condole with you. What ought to be done with her?"

"Whatever made you do it?" asked Fane, turning to Sibyl, who leaned back in her chair with a delightful air of meekness; a smile touching her lips, however, and dancing in her shining eyes, rather spoilt the full effect of humility.

"The impulse of the moment," she replied. "I felt obliged to do it after listening to the others. Oh, it was glorious fun to stand up and speak to all those people. I felt inspired. I think I was never so excited and carried off my feet."

Fane returned to the paper with the air of a man at his wits' end, and read her little speech, annoyed, and yet forced to admire; while Dr. Fullagher expressed the charitable hope that Miss Sibyl had paid dearly for her excitement in the after effects.





## CHAPTER IV.

### WEARINESS.

“My life is a fault at last, I fear :  
It seems too much like a fate, indeed !  
Though I do my best I shall scarce succeed.”

*Browning.*

ABOUT this time Edith came out of the Rectory. She paused a moment, lifting her pale, tired face to the morning air, and then took the shorter way homewards. At this hour the streets were quiet, the only people abroad being workers—poor people, and here and there a business man hurrying to his office or shop. The fresh air was grateful after several hours spent in anxious watching in the sick-room.

Winifred was watching at the dining-room window, and met her at the door with an affectionate smile. She was too well trained to utter any expression of solicitude, too used to the exigencies of a doctor's profession to condole with her aunt upon the hardship of a night's lost rest. Breakfast was ready, and served as daintily

as Winifred could persuade Sarah to serve it,—for Sarah's ideas never soared beyond the plain and substantial style,—but not until Edith had changed her dress and made her morning's toilet, and Winifred was pouring out the tea, did the girl ask after Mrs. Stanforth.

“Better than I expected,” said Edith.

“Have you been anxious about her?” asked Winifred, in some concern. It struck her then that her aunt looked pale and weary, and that there was a harassed expression in her eyes.

“Very anxious,” said Edith, her beautiful mouth quivering. “I did not expect she would get over it.”

“Oh, auntie dearest, I had no idea you had been so worried,” said Winnie, distressed.

“My dear, it would not do to talk about worrying cases. One can but hope for the best.”

“But now—now you think she will do well?”

“I dare not say—I do not feel by any means sure—but I hope, oh, I hope with all my heart!” She clasped her hands tightly together in her intense earnestness. “Oh, it will be a terrible blow to me if she does not.” She began hastily eating some breakfast, and very soon rose, saying she must go back to the Rectory.

“If any urgent messages come, Winnie,” she said, last thing before leaving the house, “send



them to me there. The unimportant cases must wait a little—I shall probably be able to do part of my work between whiles.”

The Rector, cheered by his wife's satisfactory progress so far, was able to resume his usual interest in household matters; and, having ordered the dinner, was engaged in mending Con's slippers, appeasing the child's impatience by a discursive history of Daniel in the lion's den. He smiled his wintry smile, and told Edith it was good of her to call again so soon.

Mrs. Stanforth also greeted her with a smile, which, faint as it was, had yet a touch of playfulness.

“I was wrong after all,” she whispered. “I am so glad I was wrong. Don't you think I deserve a kiss?” There were tears in Edith's eyes as she stooped and kissed the sweet, pale face.

She stayed for half-an-hour; and then, bidding her patient sleep, left her for an hour or two to see the next urgent cases on her list. She felt more cheerful. The gift of life and success—which she had not ventured to hope for—was so perilously precious, so keenly dear, that she realised from the intensity of her relief how terrible would have been the loss of her friend.

She went home again for a brief while in the

middle of the day, and spoke more confidently to Winifred. Then she paid a second visit to the Rectory, not as a doctor, but as a friend, she smilingly assured her patient. Mrs. Stanforth was only too well satisfied to have her near her. She leaned upon Edith's strength, and reposed in her gentleness with the absolute dependence of the sick. Her friend's presence gave her a sense of rest and support exquisitely dear. She closed her eyes in restful content and slept.

But when she awoke it was with a frightened start. "Don't leave me!" she entreated. "Don't leave me!"

Edith's firm, soft fingers closed over the searching hand. She bent down to say some soothing word, and even as she did so perceived a change.

Mrs. Stanforth sank after that, and died at dawn next morning.

The Rector, completely overcome, retired to his study. He made no inquiries into Miss Romney's plans for those early hours before the world was astir, and Edith descended, unasked, to the drawing-room, there to wait until the children awoke. Her heart yearned over the motherless little creatures, and she intended taking upon herself the task of acquainting them with their loss.

The beautiful August morning grew brighter every moment. The soft misty sunshine, which

has a peculiar solemn far-away effect in the early hours, crept over the old dingy church, the closed houses, and the motionless, full-foliaged trees. Even the long, level clouds, lying low across the pale blue, had a graver, serener aspect than the clouds later in the day.

But Edith did not move the blind to look out. She was weary, true, but her weariness was at the excited stage when repose will not come. She passed those hours of waiting in pacing up and down, for the most part, regardless of bodily fatigue, and of the wisdom of saving her strength for the day's work before her. She shrank from the approach of this new day; its duties appeared heavy and irksome, the facing of the outside world, a dreaded nightmare. Yet she was only half conscious of this; the shrinking as the light broadened and brightened, as the birds in the churchyard and garden grew noisier, made only an uncomfortable accompaniment to her grief for the loss of her friend. The dead woman's love was returned by her to the full, and now her friend was gone, one of the few—ah, the very few—who cared for her, and believed in her as thoroughly as though she had done nothing out of the common. Her profession had not affected Mrs. Stanforth's regard, had not obtruded itself as the chief characteristic, had not absorbed in

its overpowering prominence the woman's heart and needs behind. She had got to the other side of the barrier and found a friend and a friend's sympathy.

The servants were late, but at length the first sounds of a stirring household began. Edith went out into the hall, where the housemaid was crying softly as she tried noiselessly to undo the door, in order to take in the milk. She started on seeing Miss Romney.

"Are the children awake?" asked Edith.

"Yes, ma'am, I think so."

So Edith went up-stairs. She knew there was no possibility of keeping the sad tidings from them until they had breakfasted.

About half-an-hour later her task was over. The eldest girl, May, was old enough to understand and feel her loss; but the other children, having seen so little of their mother, were more curious than distressed. Con's anxiety was chiefly directed towards the new baby. He wished to know whether it would go too, feeling this a personal matter as he had already adopted his new brother as a future plaything.

The nurse, who was feeding the baby, did so with an aggressive air; and unpleasantly pursed up lips. Edith came to look at the infant, and the woman submitted to her examination with a

sort of contemptuous disdain. She grudgingly answered one or two questions put to her about her charge's health, and added, in the offensive tone of one who resents unnecessary interference :

"Oh, *he'll* do very well, ma'am ; he don't need no doctoring, poor lamb. I understand children better than many folks."

Edith could not fail to notice the nurse's manner, and she appreciated its full significance. It was a trifling annoyance, perhaps, yet as she turned away the slow painful colour rose to her cheeks.

But there was one word of comfort given her before she left the house. The Rector opened the study door just as she reached the foot of the stairs. His face was grey and drawn ; he looked half-stupefied, half-startled.

"Do the children know?" he asked, in a whisper.

"Yes," she answered.

"Ah, thank you, thank you. I—I—did not know how to tell them," he said, helplessly. "Miss Romney, may I ask you to do us another favour? Would you mind helping the poor children about their things? May is too young, and I would rather you did it than any one, and so I am sure would—she."

"Let me do anything I can, dear Mr. Stanforth," she said, putting out her hand.

The Rector wrung it, and gazed sadly at her.

"I can never thank you for all your kindness," he said, in a dreamy, inarticulate fashion. "You were very good to her; she loved you."

Edith could only squeeze his hand.

"And you will order what they need?" he said. "I cannot do it." A touching confession from the Rector, who was so self-sufficient in all practical matters, even in those belonging more particularly to a woman's province.

She promised, and he retreated once more into his study. Edith opened and shut the house-door, and stepped out into the open air.

It was Saturday. The sun shone brightly; the street was busy and cheerful. The air was filled with the rattle of carts and all the bustle of market-day. The liveliness was positive pain to Edith. As she stepped into the street, she did so with a distinct effort of self-bracing: of gathering her faculties together, and preparing to endure cold, suspicious glances, and hard, adverse criticism. She recognised the feeling in dismay, it was so strange and disagreeable. The careless glances of the indifferent passers-by struck her with an almost physical force. She would have welcomed the shelter of her carriage. No one

could have guessed any such shrinking seeing her tall, erect figure moving easily through the crowded streets, her pale, composed face, and steady eyes looking straight ahead.

At the corner of High Street she was kept standing a moment. As she waited, two gentlemen crossed over, walking behind one of the slow carts which retarded Edith's progress. Both men were tall; one possessed a long grey beard, which floated over his shoulders. He was much older than his companion, and, from the descriptions she had heard of Dr. Fullagher, it was easy to conclude this was he. They were talking and laughing together. They reached the pavement a little to her right. Neither glanced her way, although they passed so near that the coat-sleeve of the younger man, whom she supposed to be Dr. Fane, brushed slightly against her arm. The crossing was clear, and she hastened on with quickened pace, and a painful, restricting feeling at her heart. This glimpse of these two men reminded her, at a moment when she certainly needed no such reminder, of all the drawbacks to her continued success, and of all the corresponding advantages possessed by her rival. A swift stab entered her heart, followed by a sick faintness of despair. It seemed to her in that moment that she saw in



clear vividness the full extent to which she was fettered and weighted for this contest ; she was struck by a momentary conviction of her inevitable failure. Besides, how was she to contend ? She could not solicit work ; she could not make people believe in her ;—she was absolutely helpless. They came to her or they did not ; she must be passive and accept either thing. On first hearing about her new rival the idea of warfare had been pleasurable rather than otherwise ; she was wiser now, she thought. There was no active warfare for her, and, bitterly bitter was the conviction, no fair struggle, no equality of chances, by any means.

Winifred was out, having just started for her marketing, and in Edith's state of over-wrought depression it was some slight relief to meet no question, however kindly put. She performed her morning's toilet, and after drinking a cup of tea and attempting to eat something with it, she went into the consulting-room to answer her morning's correspondence and to see what messages had come.

Sarah carefully inspected the breakfast-tray brought into the kitchen by Eliza, and then presented herself with some austerity of demeanour at the consulting-room door.

“ May I come in, Miss Edith ? ” for even Sarah



waited for permission before entering that room. Leave given, she advanced, and began her attack at once. "You've not eaten no breakfast this morning, Miss Edith, how's that?"

"I didn't want any, Sarah."

"Have you had it?"

"Had it? Oh no."

"Then I should like to know," demanded the old servant, "how you expect to do a good day's work, and hard man's work, too, if you've eaten no food?"

"I was not hungry," said Edith patiently. She smiled at the rough, anxious face. "You make as much fuss as if I were in the habit of refusing my breakfast."

"If that was your habit I shouldn't make no fuss," said Sarah. "If you was one of them as spends the day idlin' their time away on fancy-work and story-books like a many ladies you mightn't be expected to relish your food. But you ought to know as well as I do, Miss Edith, as you've need for extra support when you work as a man works. You're not one on them pulin' fine ladies as does nothin' to require good feedin'."

She paused. Edith asked herself with a little shudder, if the time could be coming when she must spend her time in the way Sarah so contemptuously described.

"It is only this once," she said, trying to speak cheerfully.

"Is there anything as you would like for dinner?" asked Sarah, who did not understand the refinement of tempting an appetite with the unexpected.

"Anything; I don't care what it is. And now, Sarah, I must send you away. I am busy. Tell Edwards I shall want the brougham in half-an-hour's time."

"Were you up all last night again?" asked Sarah. Like most privileged persons, she took advantage of her privileges to the full extent.

Edith nodded, sure of the next question, and feeling a nervous dread of its coming.

But Sarah was anxious about her.

"And the night before," she said, with great dissatisfaction. "And having your mind worried by a trying case, and then on the top of that eating no breakfast, and goin' out earlier than usual into the bargain—well, a doctor may be strong enough for such capers, but no woman can be."

Edith pressed her lips together, and held her peace.

"Do take your rest this morning, any way, Miss Edith. Lie down till dinner. You ought to take care of yourself."

“I must go out this morning. I can make up my sleep after,” she answered.

Sarah paused near the door, twisting her apron discontentedly. She saw that her mistress was tired and depressed, and yet, like many kind-hearted people, she realised a greater necessity in the speaking out of her concern than in leaving the sufferer in peace. She muttered somewhat incoherently a remark or two, adding, “it was all against nature,” and then remembered Mrs. Stanforth.

“How is the Rector’s lady, Miss Edith?”

Edith pushed aside her notes, rose, and went to the bookshelves.

“She is dead, Sarah. Please leave me.”

Her face was turned from Sarah, but her voice expressed such grief that the old servant made no comment, and obeyed at once. And then, in her unnatural state of mind, her young mistress considered this silence an eloquent proof of Sarah’s judgment agreeing with the world’s.

That was a busy day; there were arrears of yesterday’s work to make up. Edith for the first time learned the difference made in the weight of work by the loss of confidence and cheerfulness. That sense of being strung to encounter cold looks and adverse criticism was an oppression. It made her almost shy of

people's eyes, the eyes of mere strangers in the streets as she passed from her carriage to the houses ; it seemed to her they must guess her profession, and find it a cause for amusement or suspicion like the others. It made her diffident in questioning her patients, in giving advice, in writing prescriptions. She fancied she read the same feelings of amusement and distrust in the matrons' eyes as they talked to her. She was also hampered by a nervous wish to please them, to advise what would be least disagreeable.

Of course, in almost every house she was questioned about Mrs. Stanforth. Some had heard of her departure, and asked, " Was it true ? " Others had not heard, and their inquiries after her were harder to answer.

" Dear, dear, I'm sorry to hear she's gone," said one comfortable matron. " It's quite a loss to the town, as one may say. Really, it's a pity for your sake too, Miss Romney. It will frighten people a little. There's Mrs. Wilkinson, I met her in the market at the bacon and cheese stall about an hour ago, and she seemed in quite a state. She says she *daren't* have you now—that she must have Dr. Faue. But I dare say she will let you know."

" Yes ; no doubt," replied Edith, feeling by

no means sure of this act of politeness on the part of Mrs. Wilkinson.

"Yes, it's a pity for your practice," repeated Mrs. Greene, thoughtfully regarding her.

"Remember how delicate she was lately," said the young doctor, a pathetic intonation of something like entreaty in her earnest voice.

"Well, that's true. She was ailing for months before. That does make a difference, of course, if only people will remember it," with the easy smile of the disinterested.

There was a call to be made at the Rectory, when she consulted with the dressmaker, and fulfilled the rather painful commission entrusted to her by the Rector. She reached home late for dinner, and too weary to make more than a pretence of eating it. Winifred regarded her with uneasiness. She had never seen her aunt so cast down, so exhausted both in mind and body. Edith shut herself up in the consulting-room after the meal. A message came for her shortly, and she went out at once. Winifred was much disturbed. Sarah took occasion to share her loneliness for a time, and poured forth an account of the morning and of her own concern—a pouring forth which redoubled Winnie's depression. Everything was going wrong at once, she thought dejectedly, after Sarah had

relieved her mind and departed. These Fanes had brought trouble upon them both. Her aunt was harassed by loss of patients and vulgar prejudices, and she herself—but here Winifred rose in the impatience of her self-scorn.

What had she been thinking of to put her peace of mind at the mercy of a man's caprice? How could she have been so foolish, so unutterably foolish as to give her heart unasked? The burning blush of shame rose to her cheeks as she stood there hiding her face in solitude. Struggle as she might, she could not alter at once what she had so recklessly, so generously done. She could not win back her heart's content in a few days—the task would take time and some hard efforts. She reminded herself that after all she had not yielded it in a moment—it is true he had not said in so many words "Love me," but had he not sought her love? She let her memory go back over the weeks of their acquaintance, and, pitiless self-judge as she was in this matter, she could not help acknowledging that he had appeared to care to win her affection. If he had meant nothing, then his seeking her out was unpardonable; but could he—could he—the man she loved and had idealised in the imagination of that sweet and tender love—*could* he have been—

only playing?—only taking his amusement in the very prodigality of idleness? The question was of great importance. She felt that she could forgive him had he *not* trifled with her, had he been in earnest, even if now his feelings were quite changed. But how was she to imagine this? She was witness to that meeting with Sibyl Fane in the library; he had acknowledged a former acquaintance—there was no excuse of love at first sight to account for his behaviour. Supposing he had been self-deceived, and had found out his mistake on seeing Miss Fane again—that was pardonable—but what a fall! what a descent from the love she knew! He had never really and truly cared for her, which ever way it was taken, and she had made a fatal mistake. And Winifred acknowledged, with a return of shame and humiliation, the gap which had come into her days. Since the garden-party she had only seen him once; that was this morning, in Market Street. He had bowed hurriedly and passed on, and the remembrance of other casual meetings, when he had always stopped with eager pleasure, was sharply forced upon the girl. The bitterness of his avoidance was present with her all that day; a constrained, uncomfortable meeting such as this was worse than none at all.

She was lost in these musings when her aunt returned. Winifred heard her go into the dining-room, and went down at once. Edith lay back in a chair, looking white and worn-out.

"I should like some tea," she said, rather faintly.

Winifred went into the kitchen to hasten Eliza, and on her return took off her aunt's hat and gloves. It was a new and alarming sight to see Edith at all exhausted. Fortunately, tea was ready, and was brought in directly. Winifred poured out a cup and placed it on a little table at her aunt's elbow.

Edith drank it, and presently rose, saying she was so tired she could do nothing, and would go to bed. A pang of anxiety made Winifred say impulsively,

"Oh dear, you are tired out! I think people must be right after all, when they say that a doctor's life is too hard for a woman."

Edith, on her way to the door, turned round almost sharply. "Oh, Winifred, pray spare me that talk at home!" she cried.

The spurt of irritability alarmed Winnie even more than the exhaustion. She could only stare blankly after her aunt as she walked quickly from the room. What could the matter be? she wondered. Was her aunt going to be ill? She



sat down again at the table, and leaning her cheek on her hand, pondered with dismay over the terribleness of such a possibility. Then a movement at the door made her look up, and she saw Edith re-enter. She came to Winifred and kissed her. "I beg your pardon, Winnie, for speaking so hastily. Forgive me, darling. I am so tired and grieved—and I could not bear you to say that."

"Oh auntie!"

"Don't you see what it means to me?" said Edith, almost pleadingly, looking into the pretty hazel eyes.

"Auntie dearest, I spoke unthinkingly," she said, regretfully. "Indeed, I am sorry! But you are so worn-out—it made me feel anxious; that was all."

"Don't you think even a man would feel tired after the loss of two nights' rest?"

"Ah, that's just it," murmured Winnie, involuntarily.

"What do you mean?" The temptation to speak with sharpness as before made Edith try studiously to control her voice.

"It seems too hard—such very hard work."

"Nonsense!—because I am tired after doing what would tire anyone, whether man or woman, you are distressed. I have known papa quite

exhausted after one night's sitting up, but no one suggested that he should give up his profession on that account. And I am strong—very little work would be done if people were always afraid of over-tasking their strength." Edith spoke, trying to get some assurance from Winifred; some denial of those impulsive words. But Winifred's dejection was too deep for her to see what would have pleased. She still looked grave, and Edith walked upstairs again, chiefly conscious of lack of sympathy.

They none of them understand, was her grieved thought. I am to be allowed nothing—not even sorrow and fatigue.





## CHAPTER V.

### THE TURNING TIDE.

“A wife, a learned lady, I considered as a very unnatural character. I wanted women to be all love, and nothing else. A *very* little prudence allowed I to enter into their composition; just enough to distinguish the man of sense from the fool; and that for my *own* sake.”

*Mr. Greville, in Sir Charles Grandison.*

FANE was making way fast. His appearance at Mrs. Lorimer's garden-party was equivalent to a public introduction. It was an authorising—what might be termed a licensing, of his setting-up. It shook the general opinion of Miss Romney's secure favour at the Hall.

“We shall hear next that Dr. Fane has been called in at the Hall,” said Mrs. Warren to her friends, and her prophecy was the expressed thought of several.

There was a complacent sentiment abroad that things were returning to the natural and safe course. If, as George Eliot says in ‘Middlemarch,’ a man's ignorance is of a sounder quality

than a woman's, what comparison can there be between his skill and knowledge and hers, in the same profession? Dr. Fullagher's sponsorship, too, went a great way, for the doctor was as thoroughly respected as an old institution, and as a man, also, who has succeeded in his walk of life. The most upsetting of radicals has a corner or two in his heart held fast by conservatism—he may look forward with ardent enthusiasm to the millennium, when peasant and duke are equal, but he still cherishes the dispensation of woman's inferiority; and though he may pant for a republic, he would conserve an absolute monarchy in each household of the republic. The Wanningssterians' submission to an old allegiance was the rebound of the bow after an unusual extension, the passing of a caprice of fashion, the return of explorers, whose curiosity is sated, to the beaten track of the old Roman road.

Circumstances had been kind to Edith on her start, and now they were equally kind to Austin Fane. Two serious cases—one a bad accident—he was fortunate in getting soon after he started, and still more fortunate in treating successfully, made him talked about. Mrs. Stanforth's death was as much in his favour as the sick lady had feared. And Mrs. Lorimer's patronage—for she called in Fane,

as was to be expected—greatly added to his popularity.

Bertie's ill-concealed passion for Miss Romney had seriously frightened his mother. She could not doubt that he was bewitched—the restless manner in which he hung about the house and garden on those mornings when Edith was expected was significant to the most unwilling mind.

Examining her doctor critically one day in order to see if there might be any reason for her son's unfortunate fancy, Mrs. Lorimer received a great shock. Miss Romney was more than good-looking—she was beautiful. It may seem strange that Mrs. Lorimer had not realised this fact before—she had not, however; and perhaps few of Edith's patients had. They had not thought of beauty—that gift of first importance to women—as regarded one who had tacitly made her looks a matter of secondary importance. A general impression prevailed that she was good-looking and pleasant, and that she possessed a fine figure. Bertie had discovered more, and with a pang his mother recognised how great a discoverer the unfortunate lad was.

Edith stood near the window, exchanging a few remarks with Violet before going. A ray of sunlight touched the oval of her cheek and

warmed it into southern glow ; her lips, relaxed from their habitual gravity as she smiled in answer to something Violet said, were beautiful and clearly cut ; her brows, straight and fine ; her large dark eyes, grave, sweet, and thoughtful. Mrs. Lorimer took no part in the talk—all at once she had become silent. She turned her cold inspecting eyes out of the window, past the terrace, the smooth lawn and blazing flower-beds, until they fell on a youthful figure in grey attire, slight and fair-haired, idly sauntering on the drive—her only son, her pride and darling. The mother shot a hasty, suspicious glance at the unconscious Edith—did she know he was waiting there ? was it the expectation of meeting him which brought that soft dreamy smile to those lips—those cruelly-beautiful lips ? She *was* beautiful as she stood in that easy, graceful attitude—the beauty and grace hurt Mrs. Lorimer.

She shook hands stiffly when Edith took leave.

“ I do not think you need call again this week. Miss Romney. I—feel better,” she said.

“ Very well. Good morning,” and Edith departed.

“ What a lovely creature she is,” said Violet, in gentle enthusiasm. Violet was so seldom enthusiastic, that the sting of these words was doubly bitter.

Mrs. Lorimer had risen, and was standing in the window, straining jealous eyes. She watched the tall, graceful figure walk quickly down the drive, she watched the slight grey one—scarcely as tall as the woman's—eagerly join it. She could not see Edith's face cloud with grave annoyance, or notice that she hurried her pace, and would not have read the signs aright even had she done so.

“A lady-doctor has no right to be lovely,” she said, with pale face and angry eyes. She compressed her lips firmly, and went on with her work for some time in silence.

Miss Romney's doom was sealed. That morning—the same morning on which she had sought counsel of Miss Jacques concerning the Women's Rights meeting—was the last time Edith visited the Hall. Motherly anxiety and jealousy acted upon Mrs. Lorimer's nerves, and at the beginning of the next week she sent for Dr. Fane.

The Hall favour made a great stride in his success. No one cares to cling to an old fashion, and Miss Romney was now only too conclusively out of fashion. Dr. Fullagher smiled and stroked his beard in huge content.

“You have gained one of the enemy's most important strongholds,” he remarked, when Fane looked in to tell how he had sped on the great

occasion. "The Amazon has not a chance left. Go and wash your hands, greatest of warriors, for thou shalt dine with me sumptuously this evening—that is," he added, with an abrupt descent from the heroic strain to the domestic, "if a visitation from the sweep has not hopelessly spoilt the susceptible David's temper for the day."

Mr. Chutterworth, also, was well pleased. He felt that his own change of medical adviser was justified by the event. At first, indeed, he was almost persuaded that, in some occult fashion, his own masterly decision of action had influenced Mrs. Lorimer; but as he had never enjoyed an opportunity of presenting her with his views on the subject, the idea called for more elaboration and thought than he had time for. He contented himself, therefore, with knowing chuckles and dark hints—hints that were clear enough to call attention to the remarkably faithful way in which his own prophecies were carried out, and to suggest the gratitude a just Providence must feel for his guidance.

"Oh, I knew how it would be," he exclaimed, swearing freely in the privileged smoking-room of the "County Club," where he stood upon the hearthrug, his feet firmly planted apart, and his thumbs hooked into the armholes of his richly



decorated waistcoat. "I said so from the first, damn it all. It's all moonshine a woman doctorin', or doin' any men's work—that sort of gammon may go down in a place like London, or America, where no one knows, and no one cares, who or what a woman is, but, damn it, it won't work in a place like Wanningster. I said so at the first, and now you see I'm right."

It will be seen from this that the manufacturer's opinion of women was tinged by a gentle contempt. Indeed it exactly coincided with the curate's in "Edwin Morris." "God made the woman for the man." Yet, comprehensive as this view appears, it did not quite suit Mr. Chutterworth's peculiar breadth of mind, for he was original enough to allow a few exceptions—under certain conditions, he recognised a woman's title to consideration and respect. For Mrs. Lorimer, for instance, his esteem knew no bounds. The pleasure of taking off his hat, and bowing almost to the dust before her, was of a quality lasting enough to warm his heart for the rest of that day. The delight, too, was stimulative in its effects: he spoke to his acquaintances in louder tones, and with greater pomposity than on common days; he bullied his work-people with additional energy. He was consistent in sinking the question of subordination in all those

cases where a woman's banking account justified her being put on a level with men. And for his wife he had the profound respect some men do feel towards those women whom, in an impulse of chivalrous generosity, they have endowed with their names—men who have not quite got over their surprise at finding a woman with power to attract them. Indeed, in Mr. Chutterworth's wonder at what the astounding perfections of his wife must of necessity be since they had won his admiration, he not only raised her in estimation above every woman and man, but was almost tempted to question whether she must not also be in some slight degree superior to himself. This, however, it must in justice be said was a weakness which rarely assailed him. He gave a dinner-party in honour of Mrs. Lorimer's change of favour. Since his spirited conduct with regard to Miss Romney's account he had been nobly generous in the matter of entertainments. Whether his schemes to gain Fane as a son-in-law prospered or not, he could not reproach himself with having omitted any efforts for their success. He was heroically determined to do all that may become a father—that is, to “spare no expense.” Nor did he leave his deeds to speak for themselves. Fane was made much of at gorgeous feasts, and was gener-

ously informed of the cost of the choicest delicacies placed before him. Mr. Chutterworth would dilate upon the money he had spent upon his "mansion" and furniture, upon his grounds and horses, and upon his daughter's accomplishments. He would draw attention to his last gift of jewelry to Louisa or Sophy, in order to proclaim the newest addition to their solid advantages, and hint with Chutterworthian ambiguity at fabulous sums. Money was his god, and no conception entered his devout mind that its worship could be less servile and binding on others.

Of course, neither Edith nor Winifred received invitations to The Elms, for the manufacturer showed an almost nervous dread of falling behind the times in this matter, and Dr. Fullagher, sure of not meeting the terrible "Penthesilea," graciously accepted invitations, and went when he was in the humour to amuse himself with his neighbours' weaknesses. He was interested in watching the growth of his two young friends' popularity, and so real was his interest that he hardly grudged the sacrifice he made for its sake. And the sacrifice was not despicable, for the doctor considered dining a fine art quite beyond practice in what he termed a "rabble." He declared that none of his acquaintances possessed a cook worthy of the name. A dinner, therefore,

eaten at any table in Wanningster except his own marked that day sadly for him as a day on which he had not dined. Still, apart from the dinners, he enjoyed this return to social dissipation about this time.

His friends did not find that his late seclusion had softened the asperities of his temper, or that the temporary withdrawal of their favour had clothed him in the much-needed graces of humility and gentleness,—on the contrary. Mr. Milward, whose ardent pursuit of hobbies led him to court more frequent rebuffs than the one-idea'd business men, lamented in all good faith and kindliness the increased captiousness under the eharitable name of “infirmities of age.” He little thought of the deep resentment cherished by Dr. Fullagher against those patients who had left him—or rather whose families had left him. The old doctor watched their patronage of his friend with sardonic satisfaction; but the satisfaction did not lessen or soften in the least his wrath at their former slight to himself. And then, too, he felt free to show a little more openly his want of love and reverence for his townspeople. Their good opinion now did not mean payment of his butcher and baker; nor would it even make any material difference to his friend; the doctor believed firmly that Fane's success

was assured, so he allowed himself the indulgence of that rarest luxury—independence of speech.

“Let no man say he has known luxury until he has known that,” he remarked one evening in confidence to Austin and Sibyl. “People talk about freedom—freedom of thought, freedom of action and of this, that, and the other—well, let them talk, it’s all they’ll probably ever know of what they talk about. Freedom is on a par with the poet’s May, and the angelic qualities of children. No man is free who works for his living—he must truckle to whom, for want of a more comprehensive name, we’ll term his customers. He must admire the wisdom of fools ; he must open eyes and mouth in astonishment at the learning of the ignorant ; he must hold up a looking-glass to the vain ; he must bend before the arrogant ; he must, like Artemus, have “nary a sentiment,” but he must not say so ; he must say, “Yours is mine exactly,” or, according to his worldly wisdom, which means his powers of acting and of self-effacement, it will be a reverent, “That is what we ought to think, is it, oh prophet of the people ? How good it is to have the question decided for us !” He is in bondage to his character, or rather, not *his*, but the ruled and squared lines prescribed by conventionality.

The poor relief of saying to any pompous ignoramus, who rams patronage with insults down his throat, "You are a fool; I care *that* for you," is denied him.

"A mournful deprivation, truly," assented Austin, while the doctor's tone of injury upset Sibyl's gravity.

"But, doctor dear," she said, "he can always be like the thoughtful parrot."

The doctor waved away her frivolity with his cigar.

"Don't interrupt an orator when the fit is on him. Thinking?—does thinking a man's an ass make one any fonder of his impertinence? The whole system is wrong. Some enthusiasts prate of the nobility of work—it seems to me the curse of disgrace clings to it oftenest. When work is honestly and truly considered honourable, and workers as respectable as the idle and independent, the vulgar and narrow-minded will follow the fashion, and we shall lose the present odious snobbishness. I could say chapters on this subject."

A groan from Fane.

"I could say a whole book," said the doctor, with a sharp look, "a book as long as Ecclesiastes. But I won't. Everything has been said before. You look relieved," he added.

"I am," said Fane, with the faithful candour of a friend.

The doctor stretched himself comfortably.

"Well, I needn't humbug any more. I can understand your irritability, old fellow; you are a long way off freedom yet. Next time Chutterworth shows signs of boring me with his trenchant observations on matters too high for him, I'll open the fiend's eyes."

Feeling thus towards his friends, Dr. Fullagher was not very patient when disturbed in his half-cynical, half-kindly observation of Sibyl's popularity. He did not respond cordially, for instance, to Mr. Milward's sudden demands upon him for a literary or scientific discussion. On one occasion the brewer approached his retired spot, and without any warning opened upon him with the startling inquiry—"What did he think of Browning?"

Mr. Milward had dipped into some of that poet's lighter works the evening before, and was as a consequence afire with critical ardour.

"I don't think of him," said Fullagher, brusquely. "I have too much respect for my brains. I want them to last my life."

Mr. Milward tittered.

"Ah, you are not as ignorant of his poetry as you wish me to believe. You must have read



some of his poems, at least, to speak like that."

"Not bad," said the doctor, nodding. "I'll tell you what I think of him, if you like."

"Do!" said the brewer, eagerly.

The doctor gathered his beard in his hand, and looked at him from under his half-closed eye-lids.

"He is a Sphinx in a garrulous mood."

Mr. Milward laughed.

"Oh, come, doctor! that is severe—that is too severe. In his shorter poems he is intelligible, oh quite! The charge of obscurity may perhaps be made against his longer works."

"I fancy it has been," said the doctor, drily. and Mr. Milward, somewhat discomposed at this trenchant kind of criticism, moved away to Mrs. West, whose mind was virgin soil, gifted with the power of continual self-replenishment, and to whom he could pour forth his remarks with a gratifying sense of bestowing edification.

Happily delivered from his tormentor, the doctor was able to return to his observation of Sibyl. She was, of course, the centre of a group. It gave him a fine pleasure to see the young men cluster about her chair; to see the effect of her serene speeches upon the astounded matrons and awkward young ladies. Mona, who had held



something of the same position before Sibyl's arrival, paled before the superior brilliancy of the London lady. Dr. Fullagher noticed with sardonic shrewdness that Miss Milward did not "get on" so cordially with Miss Fane as the other girls, and found for the fact the very natural explanation of jealousy.

"And then, of course," he was just enough to reflect, "being already attached, she has no professional interest in the matter."

Mona had, in fact, become engaged a few days after she told Winifred of her father's engagement.

"It was like a game of consequences," she had remarked when telling her friend about it. "Mr. Jack Chutterworth and Miss Mona Milward met in High Street. He said, 'I'm awfully sorry.' She said, 'So am I.' He said, 'Suppose we make a match of it?' She said, 'I have no objection.' They lived happy ever after. But we haven't got to that part yet," added Mona, with characteristic candour. "Being engaged hasn't made me feel a bit different."

This was a condensed account of the betrothal. The romantic scene where the lovers came to an understanding was High Street, and the conversation was as follows.

"I say," said Jack, with feeling, "I'm awfully

sorry to hear this about the old gov—I mean Mr. Milward—awfully sorry.”

“You can’t be as sorry as I am,” said Mona, dejectedly.

“Why no, I suppose not,” said Jack, greatly disturbed at seeing her so unlike herself. “I didn’t mean I was, you know. Of course it falls heaviest on you.”

“I shall go out as a governess,” she said with gloomy decision.

“Oh, I say!” expostulated Jack in real horror.

“Only I don’t know enough history and geography. I must be a factory girl—I mean hand. Do you think your father could find room for me in his factory?”

“Oh, come, now!” Jack cried. “You don’t mean it of course,” he added, catching eagerly at the most natural explanation. “You’re only joking.”

“I shall never joke again,” said Mona.

“Oh, I say, come!” in alarm at this tragic climax. “I thought you wouldn’t like it, you know, but I didn’t think you would take it to heart quite as much.”

“Wouldn’t you take it to heart? But perhaps,” said Mona, with well-assumed indignation, “perhaps you think I have *no* heart!”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that, you know,” said Jack.

blushing vividly. "You ought to know what I think of you." He coughed and looked dreadfully embarrassed.

Mona knew these signs well, and triumphed in anticipation.

"Do you think you could come to care for me—at all?" stammered Jack, in the hopeless tone of one who knows he is talking of the impossible.

"No," said Mona, unable to resist one further torment.

"I thought not," said Jack, sadly. He paused in the street. "I think I'll go this way."

"Don't be in such a terrible hurry," said Mona, walking on as she spoke, so that he was obliged to keep up with her. "Would you like it if I only *thought* I could care for you?"

He looked puzzled for a moment.

"Well, you know, that would be better than if you thought you *couldn't*."

Mona noted this down privately as Jack's one brilliant speech.

"But wouldn't you rather I was *sure*? Why don't you ask me that?"

"What?" said Jack blankly.

"Why, that!" exclaimed Mona, pouting. "Oh dear," she thought, "I shall have to explain it all again; perhaps make his offer myself."

Why didn't I secure the chance while it was mine!" To Jack she said, "You only asked me if I *thought* I could care for you—in such a matter don't you think certainty is best?"

"I understood you to mean you *were* sure." Jack spoke with diffidence. He knew his intellect was not equal to Mona's, and he was sensitive on the head of annoying her by stupidity.

"Why won't you understand?" she said, as he was quite prepared to hear. "I *am* sure—but not in that way," and she turned away her head and blushed, biting her lips as she impatiently assured herself that, if he failed to read the right meaning *now*, he deserved to lose her, and should certainly gain what he deserved. Fortunately for Jack, her blush inspired him. A radiant expression illumined his countenance.

"Do you mean the other way then?" cried he, almost incredulously.

"Of course I do," said Mona, tears of vexation coming into her eyes.

"Oh, I say," said the successful lover in the subdued tones of rapture demanded by High Street on a busy day. "It's awfully good of you, you know. But—you aren't vexed about it, are you?" as he noticed the tears.

"I thought I was doing the proper thing," said Mona, so saucily that he drew a breath of relief.

"I'll try to make you happy—you must tell me everything you like, you know."

"I will write a list as soon as I get home. There's one thing I *don't* like."

"What is that?" asked Jack, somewhat fearfully.

"Sentiment." Mona's tone was curt.

"You're rather hard on a fellow," he remonstrated.

"When I've just said yes? Well, of all the unreasonable creatures!"

Jack laughed joyously. "It's too late to go back! A promise is a promise."

"And a man's a man," she retorted. "When you get what you want you show the cloven foot at once." While to herself she said, "If he improves at this rapid rate he will be a bright and shining light by the time we are married."

Her father's approaching marriage, and her own engagement—for she was not without many qualms and fears—made Mona quieter than she used to be. She did not feel any drawings towards Sibyl; she was sore against her on account of Oscar Ardley's desertion of Winifred—she may even have resented a little Sibyl's usurpation of her own province in society; but when the doctor set down her coldness to jealousy, his amiability overshot the mark. Mona was an unselfish partisan. She was fond of Winifred, and for

Edith she had the loving worship of enthusiastic youth, and she felt, therefore, to use her own words, that she could not "fuss over" the Fanes as other people did.

The fuss was by no means in Mona's imagination. The Fanes received all the attention, the homage and flattery generally accorded an eligible bachelor and his sister. Great part of Dr. Fullagher's enjoyment at The Elms' and other entertainments consisted in seeing Fane victimised. His prediction concerning the young ladies who would solicit Sibyl's friendship was amply verified. But Fane walked scatheless through the very visible snares set for him. Winifred had won his quick admiration; but Winifred seldom came in his way, and he had found a greater attraction at the Hall.

Without entering into any conscious elaboration of the qualities his ideal woman should possess, it seemed to him that Violet was all a man's wife should be. She was pretty, she was graceful, and there was a refinement and delicacy in her style and grace that charmed him more than her good looks. There was something irresistibly attractive to his fancy in the secluded life the girl led at the Hall. She lived so completely withdrawn from the bustle and crowd of Wanningster, and of his working ordinary life. She

was as far removed above the town's events, and the little interests and ambitions of the other girls as a lady of old was above the din and confusion of battle. She was calm and unruffled, in the shadowy, old-fashioned rooms of the Hall, or moving serenely about the picturesque old garden. The topics of the day rarely drew a remark from her. Violet, herself, would have said she was not clever. In Austin's eyes, the lack of enthusiasm and of sympathy with the subjects he heard so much of from those who affected all-knowingness, was a virtue exceedingly grateful. He enjoyed his visits to the Hall in a fantastic, fastidious fashion. The air of leisure, of well-ordered, well-bred repose that brooded over the place was delightful to him; and the Hall, itself, old, ivy-covered, with its low rooms furnished in dim richness of bygone fashions, pleased his beauty-loving eye. And Violet, with her fair delicate face, quiet blue eyes, and slow moving grace, made a fitting and charming inhabitant.

Mrs. Lorimer was quietly cordial to him. From the first she had allowed him the footing of an acquaintance instead of the merely official. She showed punctiliously in every way that she did not regard the Fanes as being in the rank of the townspeople. She asked Sibyl to come and see Violet. She asked the brother and sister to



dinner. Any suspicions Violet might have had as to her mother's designs for her in this unusual friendliness had been prevented by a hint concerning Bertie, which informed her that his matrimonial affairs had begun to need guidance. Mrs. Lorimer hoped that Sibyl would divert Bertie's mind from his unfortunate passion for Miss Romney. Bertie was pleased to admire Miss Fane, and even to find pleasure in her society, but the lad moped and set up melancholy airs of the dejected lover, greatly to his mother's grief and irritation. When Miss Fane failed to win his allegiance at first sight, matters appeared so desperate that Mrs. Lorimer suggested traveling, or visiting his friends, in order to tempt his disordered fancy. Bertie baffled her even here. He moodily expressed his distaste for these pleasures, and his determination to stay where he was. He refused visits from one or two of his dearest friends, and his mother was fain to leave nature to its own work, still hoping that nature might find a powerful aid in Miss Fane's fascinations.

"I believe," remarked Sibyl one evening, when they sat out in Dr. Fullagher's garden, "I believe young Lorimer is in love with Miss Romney."

"Poor devil!" ejaculated the doctor, slowly, dragging out the words with cordial commiser-



ation. He immediately added, "I beg your pardon, Miss Sibyl. Your remark was a shock to me. I have rather a kindly liking for the young fool."

"Does he confide his love-griefs to you, Sibyl?" asked Austin, as he lay back in the dusky twilight, smoking comfortably with hands clasped behind his head. "I noticed you appeared deep in talk yesterday afternoon on the lawn."

"Oh, it doesn't need any so-called confidence to guess what's in the boy's mind," said Sibyl, with a low little laugh. "He is evidently unused to the pangs of unhappy love."

"He may thank his gods it *is* unhappy," said the doctor.

While Fane laughed lightly. "How he must hate me!"

"I fancy he does," said Sibyl. "I met him outside Kirby's this morning," she added, "he had just been buying his lady's photograph. He looked quite flushed and agitated at having obtained possession of it."

"May I ask if you were indulged with a glimpse?" said Dr. Fullagher, "or was the face of the elderly charmer too sacred to be gazed at by the profane eye?"

"Elderly!"

"Why, naturally. Women only take to

medicine when they are disappointed in love, or have given up all hopes of marriage. She must be advanced in years to stand where she does in the profession, and to have won the—er—half-love of a knight like Lorimer. Three unmistakable proofs," said the doctor, raising his glass to his lips.

"What is she like, Sibyl?" asked Austin.

"What Dr. Fullagher says, of course," she said, laughing. "Look here, good people, I will invest in one of her photographs some day and then you shall see for yourselves."

"That," said Dr. Fullagher, knocking the ashes from his cigar, "that, my dear Miss Sibyl, is a pleasure that can wait. I engage for myself, and I think I may add for you too, Fane, not to clamour unduly for the fulfilment of your promise. I will also add that however long your delay may be, neither Fane nor I will make any attempt to anticipate your purchase."

"'As witness my hand.' Very well," said Sibyl, serenely, "then you shall not be troubled to admire."

"No—I don't think we shall," cried the doctor, with a sudden explosion of laughter in which Fane joined.

Sibyl rose with a little frown. "Ah," she said, playing with her fan, "they laugh that win."

"Granted. That's exactly why we are laugh-

ing," said the incorrigible old doctor. Then he composed his muscles, and glanced severely at the slender white-robed figure standing before him. "Fane," said he, "I fear there is a traitor in the camp. I believe your sister intends going over to the enemy."

Sibyl folded her arms and confronted her accuser. "How should I do so?" she asked.

"Great heavens! do you suppose *I* am going to show you the way?"

"Because," she added, "I do feel sometimes as if I should like to tell her I take her part. I am very very sorry for her."

The doctor sprang up, almost overturning his chair, and, like the courtiers of the King of Denmark, called for light. "Lights! lights!" he cried, going to the dining-room window. "This twilight plays the very devil with the feelings. Good heavens! they are all alike!—all sentimental—all! And I thought *you*," he added, reproachfully, looking round, "were a brilliant exception." He vanished within.

This was a warm evening in September; one of the last on which they were able to sit out of doors in the dusk.

Fane's visits to the Hall were much more frequent than his patient needed. In fact, the success of her plan so far, the very satisfactory

progress of Fane's and Violet's mutual attraction, did Mrs. Lorimer so much good that she only occasionally found it necessary to consult him. The proof of Violet's "sense" was inestimably precious, and, buoyed up by pleasant expectations, she found it almost easy to smile cordially at Mrs. Egerton's effusive chatter about the wedding preparations. The hope that very soon she would be able to claim her friend's sympathy in turn, made her generous with her own.

Mrs. Lorimer's hopes were not unfounded. Fane, having broken himself in to the yoke of a practice, regarded matrimony with resignation as being the next step in his career. He had looked forward to marriage as a possibility in some distant future—what might almost be termed a development of nature. The haziness of the uncertain date of the development had cleared away within the last few weeks. He had begun to think there was no need to put off for an indefinite period—marriage would be a safeguard against the attentions of the Chutterworth and Warren girls. This being decided, it was not difficult to encourage the appropriate sentiments of the would-be Benedict, and to fall into a proper warmth of affection towards Violet Lorimer, seeing that he had already decided that she would make an ideal wife. She possessed

for him all the charm which a quiet, reserved, serene nature has for one impulsive and passionate.

Fane did his wooing leisurely. He felt none of the frantic desire to make sure of his mistress, which spurs on a passionate lover to declaration. He had no wish for such ardour. He told himself that he had outlived it—that a great passion did well to pass away the time of hot-headed youth, but for a man of thirty-five it was incongruous and fatiguing. The unruffled composure of his serious courtship had a rare and delicate charm of its own. He found Violet's shy graciousness, her sweet downcast eyes and flushes as delightful, more delightful, than if his heart had been torn with hopes and fears. They were all confessions of her feelings; and Fane appreciated the peculiar fitness of things which made the woman he designed to ask to be his wife, care for him with the tenderness and trueness of her whole pure heart.

And one November day as they strolled under the trees in the park, her shy, reserved sweetness warmed his impulsive heart, and he caught her hands in his and asked her to be his wife. The impulse made him feel and speak like a lover. Violet perceived no want—the quick words, the strong clasp, the man's deep, ardent eyes gazing into hers, made her tremble

with a strength of feeling hitherto unknown in her calm life. She gave him her hand gravely and sedately, too reserved to show how passionately her heart went with it. But, when Fane went in triumph to tell Mrs. Lorimer, she ran to her room, and kneeling by the bed shed a flood of happy tears.

Mrs. Lorimer made no pretence at any difficulties. She smilingly allowed his suit, and offered her hand to shake. Violet wondered a little at matters being arranged so smoothly with her mother—she expected at least some dissatisfaction and regrets—but Fane had seen enough to make him shrewdly confident.

Sibyl's congratulations were most cordial. Violet was everything that was charming for a sister-in-law, and she was delighted. But the news was not agreeable to Dr. Fullagher.

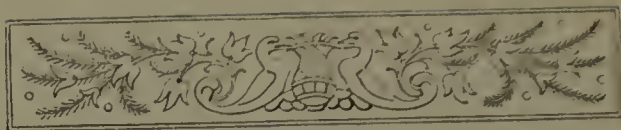
"If a man must marry," he was pleased to observe, "let it be for money. As my friend Croaker says, 'One may find comfort in the money, whatever one does in the wife.' But, good Lord, it's awful heavy interest to pay."

The thought, however, of the disappointment the engagement would be to several parents and their daughters acted as a restorative upon his first depression, and moderated his view of its being an unqualified misfortune.

“It will allay the feverish agitation of the feminine bosom at least,” he remarked. “The drapers, too, will feel a difference—they’ll find there is no immediate hurry about enlarging their premises; and, by the powers, my dear fellow, your own bills will be considerably cut down.”

The engagement was a blow to several, and to none more than Mr. Chutterworth. After all his gorgeous feasts! After all the money he had spent! If any man was guilty of a blackness of ingratitude to shame even a lost soul, that man was Austin Fane. Fane’s ambitious attempt to “ally” himself with the best family within his reach was a piece of audacity singularly repugnant to the manufacturer. It served, however, to subdue him, and prevented any utterance of his wrath to Fane. The next time he met Fane he said “How d’ye do” in an awkward fashion, averting his eye, and looking so exceedingly uncomfortable that there was no doubt how deeply he was offended. Fane’s amusement was undisturbed by any fear that Mr. Chutterworth would punish him by more than the loss of some dinners. He did not think Mr. Chutterworth would risk his reputation as a man of fashion by going back to Miss Romney.





## CHAPTER VI.

“BECAUSE YOU ARE A WOMAN.”

“I have no comfort for thee, no, not one.”—*Keats*.

“I cannot bear to think what life would be  
With high hopes shrunk to endurance, stunted aims  
Like broken lances ground to eating-knives,  
A self sunk down to look with level eyes  
At low achievement, doomed from day to day  
To distaste of its consciousness.”—*George Eliot*.

THAT extreme prostration of spirit following upon Mrs. Stanforth's death was of course only temporary. Edith's nature was healthy and elastic; a long night's rest revived and strengthened her, and made her look at things with cleared vision again. She was ready next morning to take up the day's duties, not as formerly, with glad ease and vigour, for those two days' experience had dimmed the brightness of her confidence, but with the courage that will persist to the end, even when fearing that that end must be failure. And all her courage was



needed ; almost every day she was told of some fresh loss. “ Have you heard ? ” a patient would say, with the comfortable interest of one mentioning an item of news in that morning’s paper. “ Mrs. —— has called in Dr. Fane.” The phrase became to Edith what the drop of water must have been to a sufferer under the water-torture. The expectation of hearing it induced a nervous sense of awaiting the repeated pressure on a bruise. She would sometimes look with a sort of grieved wonder into the face of the prosperous woman who uttered it, half indifferently, half in curiosity. The utmost sympathy she received was on a par with Mrs. Greene’s, “ It is rather a pity for your practice.”

She was never kept waiting for news of her rival’s progress. Some one was always ready to detail every fresh success, to pour forth praise and admiration of him into her ears. His name grew painful to her, not for dislike or jealousy, but because it was the representation not only of her own failure and waning popularity, but of the narrow prejudice which made that failure final. Bear up as bravely as she might, she could not fail to see that what opposed her now was not the ordinary opposition of man to man, not the slowness of the public to employ a new doctor, not the caution which will not advance

until his ability is proved, not the drawback of unfortunate cases, not, in short, the first period of waiting and probation which must be passed by every worker. Her disadvantages were not accidental or accessory, but fundamental and immovable. The causes which made people leave her must remain wherever and as long as she practised.

This conviction was gradually forcing itself upon her, breaking down bit by bit the steady opposition she set against it. And she did oppose it with almost an agony of resistance—she dared not yield to it, instinctively aware that when the day came on which she must, then she must also yield to something very like despair. She pushed the thought from her, she could not face its full significance. The same sensitiveness kept her silent upon the subject of the falling-off of her patients. Not even to Winifred did she breathe a word of what must be evident to every one in the house. She went and came as far as possible as usual, doing with a pathetic zeal the lessening work that remained in her hands, blindly and persistently ignoring the result of this losing process which would necessitate changed plans and new decisions.

Only once a complaint came from her, and that was to Miss Jacques. It was a dull

November afternoon, and she had driven through the muddy lanes bounded by leafless hedges and sodden fields, tired, and oppressed by a weight of despondency which seemed to make the dreariness, bleakness, and desolation of the country and weather an appropriate and harmonious setting. Nature lay dead and forlorn, and in Edith's heart was the unacknowledged conviction that her own hopes were dead and forlorn.

“Oh, it is very hard to be a doctor,” she said in the course of her talk with Miss Jacques.

“All bread-winning for women is hard,” said Miss Jacques. “I found mine terribly hard. An old friend of mine, who had herself taught for twenty years, and had been successful too, said when she heard I was about to start a school, ‘You had better sell apples.’ I have never forgotten her words, and I have always ruefully subscribed to their truth.”

“Teaching could not be so hard as my profession,” exclaimed Edith, impulsively.

Miss Jacques looked at her as she sat leaning towards the fire, one elbow on her knee, and her cheek resting on her hand. The firelight flickered on the tired face, and the old lady saw that the expression as well as the contour was changed. The cheeks were thinner and paler, the eyes looked larger and darker, and there was

an almost haggard restlessness and anxiety in their depths.

“Well, perhaps not,” said Miss Jacques, speaking briskly, because of the temptation to betray how tender-hearted the change made her. “I daresay you are right. You have to deal with bodies, and they are more important than minds, and there is the old difficulty of results being seen. The proof ‘Arise and walk’ must be given by you. But parents are not so eager to pry into the mind’s improvement. Their carelessness and density on that score were a great loss to me, I know. I wanted their investigation of my work—it was too good to be ignored!”

“Have I not given proofs?” said Edith. “But they do not care for the proofs; they will not judge me by them. If they were dissatisfied with my skill I could understand it, and there would be a chance for me to overcome their dissatisfaction in time by successful treatment. But, Miss Jacques, they leave me, and not one of them has expressed discontent at my treatment, or left me because it was necessary to call in fresh advice. What resistance can I make against such unaccountable behaviour?—I am simply helpless.”

“Yes,” said Miss Jacques, quietly. “The fashion is against you.”

Edith turned her eyes from the fire and looked at her inquiringly.

“My dear friend, it is so,” said the old lady, tenderly, but firmly. “You are a woman.”

Edith got up from her low chair with a look of anguish, almost of dread.

“Oh no, don’t say that,” she said, breathlessly. “How can that be the reason? It did not prevent their employing me for two years.”

Miss Jacques read well enough the meaning of that wistful appeal in the pathetic voice and eyes, and it required a considerable effort on her part to steel herself against it. “What is the good of giving her deceitful assurances?” thought she. “They would not even comfort her for the moment. She is too honest for anything but the truth, and I will not give her reason to distrust me.”

“Their doing so was chiefly a caprice,” she said. “An extravagant whim of the same fashion that is leaving you now—simply an exception to an ancient, time-honoured rule. There are certain broad rules which are kept to pretty strictly on the whole, but which are occasionally relaxed for a short period. For instance, a cold winter and a warm summer is

the rule for the seasons, but mild winters do occur, and snow has been seen in June—still these are acknowledged exceptions, and cold in winter and heat in summer remains the rule. Another old-established fashion is the incapacity of women for anything but household and menial work—when nature resists the crushing and destructive forces of custom, she is shown her mistake by the prompt indignation and incredulity of an outraged generation. Joan of Arc received the due reward of her temerity. We do not burn witches now-a-days, but the old barbarism lingers in a refined and modified form. A woman whose powers are above the average, or rather who persists in cultivating and using her superior powers, is still regarded with suspicion. You, as an individual, are not in fault. You have been allowed your exception—you have tasted some of the privileges and independence of the superior sex—and the townspeople have had theirs, and now it is necessary for the continuance of a first principle that they should throw you over and employ a man. Surely you prefer your sex to be in fault, not your skill?—though, by-the-by,” she added, half to herself, “the greater certainly includes the less in this case.”

Edith did not hear the half-aside.

“No, no—don’t you see?” she said, eagerly, in answer to the sentence before. “Don’t you see, if I fail in one place because I am a woman, I must always fail? That is the hopelessness of it, and that presses upon me constantly, for I fear,” she faltered with white trembling lips, “I know the things that have hampered me here will hamper me wherever I may go. Oh yes! you are right—I *know* you are right! Your prophecy is coming true. ‘They all with one consent,’” she said wildly. “They leave me one after another—I hear of losses day after day—and there is no possibility of gaining others in their place. Oh, Miss Jacques, what shall I do? what shall I do? I hoped so much!” She fell on her knees beside her friend and burst into passionate tears.

Miss Jacques gently removed her hat and stroked the bowed head. For some minutes she did not speak. Tears, even such terrible tears as these, would relieve the breaking heart. She guessed the rarity of this relief to Edith.

“My dear,” she said, when the sobs were quieter, “life is very hard. We all of us feel in turn that there is no sorrow like unto our sorrow. I am twice your age. I have lived my life, and watched the lives of many others, and what has struck me chiefly is that we seem to be here



to learn, most of us, to do without. I do not pretend to explain or understand—I only mention what I have observed. I do not understand why we should be denied our hearts' desires, our ambitions, our longings; why, when we aspire, we should be cast down, and why, with such capacities for enjoyment, for cultivation and enlargement, bestowed upon us, so many of us should be reduced only to what will keep us alive. I was as ardent, and nearly ten years younger than you when I started life. I felt strong and confident, capable of so much, longing for something higher, nobler, fuller than the mere drudgery of bread-winning. The world was so wide, so glorious, and full of such great treasures, and life seemed so beautiful, so full of delight and opportunity, and I, yearning so to live it. I felt sure of success,—I should soon make money and be able to live as I liked. But, Edith, I never did. I never got beyond the most sordid interests, the monotonous routine of uncertain winning of daily bread. Trivial annoyances, constantly-recurring, petty anxieties have clogged me from that first beginning until I retired. What was in me for better and pleasanter things has been ground down to treadmill work. Worthless relations have dishonoured my once unstained name. I



have lived through the shame brought upon me by other's disgrace, and been cast off by most of those who once called themselves friends. It seemed as if all I valued must be taken from me; all I hoped for denied me; as if, before death touched me, I must be brought down to the scantiest of human provisions. That has been my lesson, and each page of it bore its own especial bitterness. My aims were not as defined as yours, and they were infinitely selfish; I was artistic, beauty, and pleasure-loving. I saw what splendour and beauty and happiness were to be enjoyed, and I longed for a share. I wanted “more life and fuller;” and when, instead, my life grew cramped and more cramped, it seemed as if there was so much waste. Ah, well, I have learned what I have learned. We set out in hopes of happiness, and end by feeling grateful for respite from pain.”

That word “pain” touched Edith's trained instinct to relieve.

“And your respites are so few,” she said, her bosom still heaving with the after effects of those sobs, but looking up at her friend with compassion. “How could I forget? I have been thoughtless, and have distressed you.”

“I am very well to-day,” said Miss Jacques. “And you have not distressed me in the way

you mean. I am glad you should tell me your troubles—pouring them into a friend's ear does good. But I did not need to be told—I knew how things were going, how they must inevitably go, and my heart has gone with you all the time. It is hard to see the cross bound on those we love. I always thought Simon the most enviable character in the New Testament. 'Him they compelled to bear His cross,'” she said, dreamily.

The words were spoken in a low, sweet, sad voice, and caught Edith's attention curiously. She was still kneeling, and she paused for a moment with suspended breathing. The small room was silent, dusky and full of shadows, the light from the fire only red and subdued, and extending little beyond the hearth. The melancholy languid twilight seemed heavy with dead hopes, denied ambitions, and the unsatisfied wants of monotonous, repressed existences. She got up and walked to the little diamond-paned window. The garden, that sunny, flower-blooming spot only a few weeks ago, lay bare and mournful. The flowers were dead, excepting some chrysanthemums, which made a dejected show in the damp air; the rose-bushes were stripped of leaves; and the wet sighing wind swayed their twigs and the dark branches of

the trees. The sky was covered with grey clouds, and below them were heavily driven darker ones in weird, grotesque forms.

But Edith was not studying the outer aspect.

Her cross! that meant a life-long affliction, a life-long want. Was she to believe that she was to be so beggared of all she cared for? To do without—*this*? She trembled from head to foot. Cold dew broke out upon her brow, a deadly sickness passed over her.

She could not believe it. She would not believe it—not until she must. She would bear troubles as bravely and as humbly as she might; but this—this—to give up this dear ambition that gave all salt and meaning to her life, to give up her one work, this was a renunciation beyond her power. For she was not yet crushed and weakened—adversity was too new a visitor—she was not worn out by a protracted period of disappointments, and glad only for quietude.

Quietude! with her active brain, warm heart, capable hands, and craving for good and useful work! The mere idea chafed and terrified her. She thought of the lives of the women around her—of the trivial occupations, the mere make-shifts of employments for want of true ones, the monotony, the small interests, the narrow anxieties, the pathetic dependence—all that kept

them purposeless, useless, and subordinate, and shivered as at the thought of a prison. Why should this renunciation be required from her? Why must this of all trials be the "cross" bound upon her? She could not believe it had to be so. She must go on in her chosen career. Better failure after failure than this deadly lifelessness of life; and after all this was only one failure. Was she to give up for one? The melancholy weather, Miss Jacques's sad history, these had helped to deepen her depression. She was tired; she would go home and rest, and gain courage. She walked back to the hearthrug. There was a steady light in her eyes; lines of resolve were about the pale lips. Miss Jacques read the change of thought in the expression. Edith spoke almost cheerfully.

"I must go," she said. "Pouring out my troubles has done me good. Thank you so much for bearing with me."

"You feel better?" said Miss Jacques, with ready response to this change of mood.

"Oh yes, much better. Please try and forget my gloom."

"Won't you stay and have tea?"

"No, thank you—not this afternoon. Winnie will expect me."

"Ay," said Miss Jacques, when she was gone

and the old lady sat in the deepening dusk beside her solitary hearth. “She is one of those who will fight to the end. She is of the stuff that martyrs are made of—and that is a kind of stuff never wasted in this world. How is it people never will accept other folks’ experience? I don’t believe one man’s experience ever yet saved the price of another’s. And after all,” she added thoughtfully, “perhaps it speaks better for the human race that it is so. Any way, she would not be the Edith Romney I know if she threw down her arms and cried for quarter because she had heard that others were slain in battle.”

Turning out of the lane leading from the Cottage, the carriage overtook Winifred in ulster and ulster hat. The coachman pulled up, and Edith opened the door.

“Come home with me, Winnie. It is beginning to rain.”

Winifred got in. She had been walking very fast, and was flushed and panting a little.

“Are you wet?” asked Edith, taking off her glove, and feeling the girl’s sleeve. “My dear child, what made you come so far in this uncertain weather?”

“Oh, I like a good walk on a dull day. Besides, I was put out, and I wanted to work it off if possible,” said Winifred, biting her lips to keep back some tears.

“Has anything serious put you out?” asked Edith. For some weeks she had feared that her child was unhappy, and that the unhappiness was connected with the ceasing of Oscar Ardley’s attentions. She wished she could help Winifred—do more to make her life less dull, and regretted for her sake that their former friends’ sense of consistency made the dropping of their acquaintance an unavoidable result of employing another doctor. But Winifred had not said a word about her disappointed affection; she had not mentioned Oscar’s name; and Edith had only learned from careful acquaintances that young Ardley admired Miss Fane. When she did learn that, she had felt bitterer against the sister than any loss had made her feel against the brother.

“Oh, it made me angry,” exclaimed Winifred. “Though I suppose one ought not to take nasty gossip seriously.”

“What is the gossip?”

“I didn’t want you to know, Aunt Edith.” said Winifred, regretfully. “I didn’t mean to tell you—but if I don’t, some kind friend will do so at the earliest opportunity. Mrs. West paid me a long visit this afternoon—she is so anxious to show that they don’t bear us any malice because Miss Harrison threw you over! But to-day she had not time to explain that her sister was so

alarmed at her bad sore throat, she positively *dared* not employ Miss Romney—you never get your professional title from her now—she came to pour forth the interesting news that people are talking about you and Mr. Stanforth.”

“Talking about me and Mr. Stanforth?” repeated Edith, blankly.

“Yes; because you go there so often, you know. Their refined minds cannot conceive the possibility of your going out of love to the children; they jump at once to the conclusion that you have designs upon the father.”

“Designs?”

“Matrimonial designs,” explained Winifred.

“Oh, Winnie!” cried Edith, with a hasty gesture and intonation of disgust. “How can people talk so? It is too revolting.”

“It is abominable,” said Winifred, warmly. “And so I told Mrs. West. ‘Oh my dear,’ she said, ‘what can you expect? People will talk.’ And she looked plaintively at me. I told her that I did not expect such vulgarity from people, even though I had seen lately a great deal of their bad taste and hatefulness. I said that they could not understand or appreciate anyone better than themselves—that they pretended lack of confidence to go with the stream, that their only reason for throwing you over is because you are



a woman, that they invented the flimsiest excuses, or rather, none at all, in order to be in the fashion—and I looked straight at her as I said it," added Winifred, vehemently.

"I am sorry you said that," said Edith.

"Oh, Aunt Edith, I *could* not help it! I hated her at the moment—I hate her now."

"They have not behaved kindly, certainly; but in our position we have to put up with a great deal. It does not answer to offend people."

"They will not do us an atom of good now whether I offend them or not," said Winifred. "All Miss Harrison's fine protestations melted into thin air at the first touch of illness. She, at least, has the shamefacedness to keep quiet, but Mrs. West's purring is too irritating. And what annoyed me so much was that composed, 'What can you expect?' I asked what she meant when she said that, and she said, well, you went to the Rectory so very often, that made people talk. Of course *she* knew it was all right (oh, Aunt Edith, don't you understand how angry I felt?)—your affection for the poor dear children, in a tone that belied her words—but people *were* foolish, they never *could* understand a person's acting from a perfectly pure motive, they *always* put the worst construction possible, etc., etc. In short, people's folly and malice being so incon-



testably demonstrated, would it not be better to give them no occasion to talk? She spoke as a friend—I thought of the hen in ‘The Ugly Duckling.’ ‘I say disagreeable things, which is a mark of true friendship.’ It’s generally the only mark it can be known by,” added Winifred, bitterly. “However, Mrs. West spoke as a true friend, and regretted—also in the cause of friendship—that her goodwill had been received in such an ill-advised manner by me. I bore that little hit composedly—it was a small price to pay for speaking out my opinion about Miss Harrison’s behaviour. So you see, Aunt Edith, you must spare people’s blushes and not look after May and the children any more.”

“I think,” said Edith, “that I should be as childish as the people who talk if I let such gossip influence me. I can’t neglect the poor children—for I believe they love me heartily, and are always glad to see me—because some ignorant gossips talk nonsense. I go for *her* sake, not people’s.”

She spoke composedly, but only with an effort. That hurt, grieved surprise was active in her mind and heart—how could people be so blind, so hard, so unreasonable, so wilfully set against her? What did they suppose a woman was who lived blamelessly amongst them? How much

did they think she could bear ? Did they forget she was made of flesh and blood even as they were, and had at least the feelings of flesh and blood ?

They were driving up High Street by this time. The short dull afternoon was closing in rain and mist. Spencer's shop was a blazing front of gas and bright colour. In the doorway stood Sibyl Fane, preparing to leave the shop, and just outside was Oscar unfurling her umbrella. He carried her library books under his arm. Sibyl was looking up laughingly, the blaze of gaslight on her fair face. The umbrella was ready, and they started.

The carriage overtook them. Winifred leaned back, clasping her hands tightly together within her muff, the colour and animation brought by walking and anger dying away to a drawn paleness. Her soft eyes fixed themselves with a stony gaze upon the window in front darkened by the coachman's back. Her heart felt empty and cold. It seemed to her that she had been cruelly treated.



## CHAPTER VII.

### MR. NICHOLSON INTERFERES.

“He loves  
Through the long day to swear and tipple.”  
WORDSWORTH.

“I said a lie then,” said Mr. Bambridge.  
*Midlemarch.*

WHEN Mrs. Nicholson sent for her in June, Edith had hoped it was the beginning of a connection amongst the poor. She had thought lately, when her capricious well-to-do patients were leaving her, that the exchange of such a connection for her present one would be preferable in almost every respect. The fluctuations of fashion would at least not affect poor people—nor would they consider it necessary to guard their sons. And then, to doctor the poor was her childhood’s ambition,—to attain it, she would not even grudge the fierce trial of losing her first practice.

In December, however, the dream of any such

practice in Wanningster was dispelled, for the very family she had built her hopes upon as the beginning failed her.

Mrs. Nicholson fell ill of diphtheria, and called in Miss Romney as a matter-of-course. Unfortunately, Mr. Nicholson laboured under the sense of a debt contracted to Miss Romney—as he phrased it, he “owed her one”—and his wife’s illness was hailed by him as an opportunity for discharging it. The form of payment had been vague in the extreme, as was implied indeed by his own phrase in alluding to his obligation; but there was no doubt in the greengrocer’s mind of his having incurred the debt. For on one occasion, when a too great indulgence in drink and wife-beating had laid his helpless victim low, Miss Romney had looked at him and had spoken to him with such frank indignation, that Mr. Nicholson could not forget. Nor could he forgive. The drink was out of him at the time of her reproach—he was, in fact, shedding tears over his Susan’s sufferings—he may have felt, therefore, that the young doctress was taking an unfair advantage over him. It is certain he lacked spirits to retort. He cowered before her anger and her flashing eyes, as though he deserved reproof. The reproof rankled, and also the remembrance of his tame acceptance of it.

For Mr. Nicholson, especially when tipsy, was a man of spirit. A sense of inferiority was repugnant to his British pride, and, above all, to his notions of the fit and true.

“What business was it of hers?” he asked himself, feeling the indignation of the Englishman whose house is his castle, and whose wife is most undeniably his chattel. Of this latter right the greengrocer was singularly tenacious,—no doubt the exercise of kicking endears the article kicked. Miss Romney’s conduct was briefly condemned as “darned impudence.”

Until that unlucky reprimand the greengrocer had not interfered with his wife’s unaccountable fancy for a lady-doctor, contenting himself with oaths of a sarcastic nature, not wholly bad-humoured, whenever the subject came under his notice. He had only threatened to hasten the departure from the world of his friend, Mr. Dick Tuggles, when that gentleman had scoffed with practised sprightliness at the folly of employing a being so low in the scale of creation as a woman to doctor his wife, and had hinted jocosely at poisoning. And although in his own circle, and in the society he enjoyed at the Queen’s Head, the idea of a lady-doctor was scouted with profound and discriminating contempt, Mr. Nicholson had taken little interest in the subject.

Miss Romney's rebuke roused him from this unnatural apathy. He brought the full power of his intellect to bear upon the question whether a woman had any right to practise medicine, and, with the unerring instinct of genius, at once decided that she had no such thing. Women's mission appeared to him as unmistakably clear as most questions possessing only one side. He artfully encouraged Dick Tuggles's scoffings, and waxed strong and valiant as he drank his favourite liquor.

He related the story of the insult he had received at Miss Romney's hands, and obtained cordial sympathy from the costermonger,—for it did not escape that worthy's notice that the rebuke bore the further stigma of being as applicable to himself as to his friend.

“Business” called Mr. Nicholson into the next town for a few days at the beginning of December. His speculations were not quite satisfactory, and the anxiety of loss pressing upon a frame already lowered by a too reckless application to spirit, counteracted any beneficial effect upon his temper which change of air and scene might have produced. He returned home in wild spirits, certainly, but rather unnatural than joyous. Prepared to bestow a playful greeting upon his Susan as an intimation that he saw no signs of

supper, he was disagreeably surprised to find his hearth in the possession of Jenny Sparre, the only woman Mr. Nicholson respected; for she was the virago of that district, and he knew from impressive experience that she exercised an almost masculine mastery in the use of natural and domestic weapons. Therefore, when Mrs. Sparre turned sharply from the fire and confronted him, brandishing the saucepan which she had just removed from the coals, all Mr. Nicholson's manly instincts were aroused. He felt he could not strike a woman.

"What the deuce are you here for?" he growled. Amid the volley of abuse poured out in reply to this polite inquiry, the reason for Mrs. Sparre's presence in his house was soon explained. She had come to "look after" Mrs. Nicholson, who was very ill—dying, as her friend declared with a sudden raising of her voice to a shout, intended no doubt to convey encouragement to the sick woman upstairs.

The husband was not stunned by the news, but he was sobered by a quick suggestion.

A revengeful gleam came into his bloodshot eyes. He deferred all outward expression of his grief, for he felt that this was a time for action. He eagerly asked what doctor had been sent for, and, on hearing Miss Romney's name, gave



utterance to oaths expressing a pathetic conviction that things always managed to go wrong when he was away.

Mrs. Sparre loudly denounced his unreasonableness.

"What would I have?" repeated Nicholson. "Why, I'd 'ave a real doctor, of course. Sick women don't know what's good for 'em."

And, controlling his eagerness to see his sick wife as admirably as he controlled his sorrow and alarm, he left the house, and made what speed his shambling gait permitted to Monk Lane. His hurry was so great, that he only visited two public-houses on the direct way, in order to imbibe the necessary support for his journey.

The page at No. 50 told him that Dr. Fane was dining next door, and Nicholson went to Dr. Fullagher's.

The two gentlemen were at dessert.

"Please, sir, here's Nicholson the greengrocer," said Samuel. "He wants Dr. Fane to go to his house as soon as he can, as his wife's very ill; and he wants to know if he'd better wait to show the way."

"Tell him to go to Jericho!" cried his master, furious at the interruption.

Samuel stood immovable, waiting for a reply he might take to the petitioner.



"Ask him what the deuce he means by changing his doctor so often," shouted Dr. Fullagher. "How dare he come at this unearthly hour! Tell him Dr. Fane will look in, in the morning, and he may thank his heathen gods that he gets as much as that."

"Please, sir, he says the case is urgent—his wife is dying," said Samuel, holding the door-handle and listening respectfully.

The doctor swore. Then added more calmly, "Is he drunk, Samuel?"

"He's been drinking, sir."

"Is his place hard to find?" asked Fane. "Had I better accept his offer of guidance?"

"Not if you value your reputation," said Fullagher. "No self-respecting crossing-sweeper would care to be seen in Mr. Nicholson's company. I can direct you to his hovel."

"All right. Tell him he needn't wait. I'll follow directly," said Fane, to the man.

"And, hark ye, Samuel," added his master, "just help him down the steps with a kick."

"Yes, sir," replied the unmoved Samuel. Habit had taught him the necessity of using some little discrimination at times—of not making a too exact and literal interpretation of his master's orders. He was closing the dining-room door when he was recalled by a "Stop!" from the doctor.

"You must find out first that Garthorpe has been properly shelved," said Fullagher to his friend. "He's an ill-conditioned fellow, and would like nothing better than a chance of a row with you on some point of etiquette, or some other damnable excuse."

"Well thought of," said Fane, rising.

"Sit still—we'll have him in. Mark him well—he's a rare villain. Samuel, just show that rascal in."

Enter Mr. Nicholson, his well-battered hat in one hand; the other, nerveless and begrimed, he awkwardly raised twice in deference to the two gentlemen.

Dr. Fullagher leaned back and surveyed the slouching cringing figure with a certain grim amusement, inviting his friend's inspection of the same individual by a gesture, half of introduction, half of exhibition.

"You said as you wished to speak to me, sir?" said Nicholson, glancing from one to the other.

"You have not been deceived, Nicholson," said the doctor, blandly. "We *do* wish to speak to you. How about Mr. Garthorpe? Have you given him up?"

"He ain't attended my wife not since June—not since June," said Nicholson, reassuringly.

"The devil he hasn't! Have you joined the Peculiar People, Nicholson?"

"Then it's all right," said Fane. "I couldn't attend your wife, you know, if another doctor was engaged."

Nicholson stared.

"No," added Dr. Fullagher. "You tried that little dodge on with me, if you remember, when you first called in Mr. Garthorpe. I didn't make it unpleasant for you, Nicholson, but Mr. Garthorpe would—Mr. Garthorpe would. He has a very just idea of his rights—and very fit too. You oughtn't to play with your doctors."

Nicholson was nervously twisting his hat round. How about Miss Romney? It would never do to have Dr. Fane refuse to attend his wife on her account. The objection struck him as contemptibly trivial; still, it was evident that trivial as it was both doctors would make much of it. He would not be baulked by it, however. The course to be taken was simple enough and absurdly easy. The gentleman had given him a hint; and he acted upon it with a readiness which showed unmistakable powers of facing an emergency.

"She's h'awful bad, sir," he muttered, hoarsely, looking in Fane's direction. "If you don't come I don't know what'll become of her. Mr.

Garthorpe—him and me 'asn't spoke not for these last six months. And as for Miss Romney—"

The two doctors exchanged glances.

"As for Miss Romney—well, she calls 'erself a doctor, but it's not a woman as one can 'ave confidence in when a person's as bad as my wife. Mrs. Nicholson were a bit took with her for her few aches and pains, and I let 'er 'ave 'er own way, as I allays do—" maudlinly.

"Yes, yes," murmured Fullagher, soothingly.

"But now she's dyin' and off 'er 'ead, it don't do—so when I come home this h'evenin' and finds as she'd called 'er in, I just went to Miss Romney's straight off and told 'er as she needn't come again, and then come on 'ere for a proper doctor."

"You are quite sure you made Miss Romney understand that her services were no longer required?" said Fane.

"There worn't no mistake about it, sir," and the gleam of revengeful mirth—prophetic, but naturally regarded by the two gentlemen as retrospective—seemed proof positive of his assertion. He was allowed to depart with the assurance that Dr. Fane would follow directly.

"Well!" said the doctor.

Fane raised his eyebrows. "Whatever made such people employ a lady-doctor?"

“His humorous touch about a ‘proper doctör’ *almost* thawed me. I *almost* offered him a glass of wine ; but I saw that he was already sufficiently fortified against the night air. I wished him to gain home in safety, and I also felt that the offer would be an encouragement to intemperance. No,” said the doctor, quieting his hospitable scruples, “one cannot offer wine to a person of Mr. Nicholson’s pretensions.”

“Directly” is a most variable period of time, and it is especially indefinite when a poor patient is concerned. Fane leisurely finished the walnuts on his plate, emptied his glass, and then pushed back his chair.

“Finish your wine before you go,” said his host. “There is no hurry.”

“The charm is broken,” said Fane lightly.

The doctör moved to his armchair by the fire and lighted a cigar, while Fane went into the hall for his great-coat, and came back into the room to button it with the air of a man quite at home. During his friend’s preparations for facing the keen outer air, Dr. Fullagher grumbled ferociously. “Urgent, forsooth, damn his impudence ! I suppose he’s gone a little too far this time—I hope he has, I sincerely trust he has. I hope you will find a case against him for the magistrate, Fane. A taste of prison and hard

labour is what he wants. His wife is a fool to stay with him. I got quite out of patience with her one day when I'd got her on my hands through his nonsense. 'Good Lord, woman,' said I, 'what in the name of all Bedlam made you marry that drunken villain?' And what do you suppose she said?"

"God knows," said Fane.

"'Oh, doctor,' says she, 'he had such wheedling ways.' 'Wheedling ways be damned,' said I. 'If he doesn't get rid of them pretty soon he'll wheedle you into your grave.' I've always said he would come to the gallows, and I hope he may," said the doctor, fervently; "I hope he may. Poor soul! it would be better for her to be done with it all; and as for him, I'd see him hanged with pleasure."

Fane had buttoned himself up, and stood with his back to the fire, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, listening amused, with quietly smiling eyes looking down upon the old doctor. At this climax he threw back his head with a laugh. "She is not obliged to stay with him. Why doesn't she leave him?"

"My dear fellow, how can I possibly understand the workings of a woman's mind?" asked Fullagher, appealing for reasonableness on his friend's part. "She has made attempts to guide

her affairs with common-sense—she has left him twice to my knowledge, but the remembrance of his ‘wheedling ways’ has always proved too irresistible. Good Lord!” cried he, in a tone of desperation, “and women are clamouring to be ranked as rational creatures!”

“Well, you know,” said Fane, impartially, “they are not all married to beating husbands.”

“Pshaw!” exclaimed the doctor, in disgust. “*You* are out of court, my friend. A man who can look forward with equanimity to putting his head into a noose is a pitiable object, truly, and his opinions are simply valueless on the matter, and will be till you have been married a year. There’s that drivelling Milward,—matrimony is his last hobby, and he’s not content with riding it himself, but must try and make everyone climb up beside him. I was at his place the other day to see if by some mistake he had got any drinkable ale, and I really felt sorry for him. I’ve never known him worse. The beauty, the divinity, the bliss, the—oh, all that sort of twaddle—of marriage was his theme. He quoted poetry—I really blushed for him. He quoted Scripture—I looked another way. ‘Marriage,’ he exclaimed, in rosy eloquence, ‘marriage is a state unequalled. There is nothing like it.’ ‘True as the gospel,’ I said,



and my emphasis misled him. 'Doctor,' he said, with beaming impressiveness, 'you should marry. Every man should marry. What says the poet?—"We are formed for happiness." I have often wondered you have never married.' 'Sir, you may wonder,' I retorted. He didn't recognise Johnson—Milward only recognises his own quotations. I told him I had my doubts about our being all formed for happiness—if we were, however, it couldn't be for the same sort. 'And you can't expect everyone to be as lucky as you, Milward,' I added."

"What did he say to that?"

"Oh, he blushed—blushed as sweetly as a girl in her teens. Really, a fine colour," said the doctor, with critical approbation. "The fact is, you know," he added, between the leisurely puffs at his cigar, "he is troubled with an uncomfortable doubt of the wisdom of what he is about to do, and he would feel uncommonly grateful to be kept in countenance by another fool."

"Well, I must go," said Fane, pulling himself together. "You are in such a fine flow this evening, doctor, that duty appears doubly irksome."

The doctor grunted and viciously pulled his beard. "So I judged from the alacrity with which you rose to obey the summons. Don't



bring your humbug to *this* market, my dear fellow," he said sulkily. And then with a return to cordial hospitality. "Take a cigar with you. You needn't mind as they are poor people, and I assure you neither Mr. nor Mrs. Nicholson are hyper-fastidious."

Fane accepted the cigar and went out. It took him a very short time to walk to Oyster Street. Nicholson had hurried back, had repassed the public-houses with reckless self-denial, and was awaiting the doctor's arrival with ill-controlled impatience. He was beginning to feel the mortifying conviction that his haste had been needless; his abstinence simply a waste of good opportunities; and to have our good deeds and sacrifices cast back to us as unnecessary is an irritating as well as mortifying experience. Nicholson possessed at least one of the characteristics of genius—an excitable temperament. He was standing in his doorway when Fane strode up, and, throwing his half-burnt cigar away, stooped under the lowly door and followed the husband upstairs into the sick-room.

Nicholson had ordered Mrs. Sparre to stop in any further following of Miss Romney's directions, and had himself banged down the window which Edith had said must remain open

for an inch or two. He studied the doctor's face so closely while he examined the patient, that Fane wondered if there was after all some fragment of affection left in the breast of the stooping, shaking, repulsive-looking creature. Was he really the anxious husband he appeared to be?

"What medicine has your wife been taking?" he asked, glancing round.

Mrs. Sparre strode a step in the direction of the wash-hand-stand, but Nicholson was first.

"This, doctor," he said, holding out the bottle in a trembling hand thickly encrusted with dirt.

Fane took it daintily—removed the cork and smelt the mixture. It may have been partly from the professional instinct to depreciate a rival's method in order to set a higher value upon his own, partly his disgust at touching something first touched by Nicholson—perhaps a little of both—anyway, he looked disgusted and emptied the bottle into the basin near.

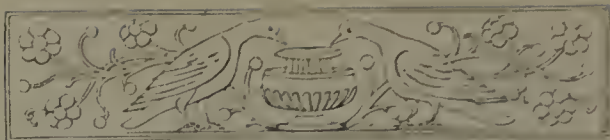
At this action, significant in a way little dreamed of by Fane, Nicholson absolutely shook from head to foot with trembling excitement.

"Wasn't it the right medicine, doctor?" he asked, hoarsely.

"Send to my house to-night and you shall have another mixture," said Fane, carelessly.

He then gave certain strict orders to Mrs. Sparre, orders which greatly disappointed that worthy woman, for bearing in most instances an uninteresting similarity to Miss Romney's; and then he departed, to make up the medicine and to finish his interrupted evening with the doctor.





## CHAPTER VIII.

### A REPORT.

“Let not that doctor e’er come near my house.”

*Merchant of Venice.*

AFTER some difficulty, Nicholson succeeded in capturing a boy to send for the medicine. The feat was somewhat difficult, for the greengrocer’s powers of motion were irregular even at their best, and his invitations to come within reach were not cordially responded to by the youth of his neighbourhood.

At length, after some parleying with one cautious lad carried on at the distance of half the street and at the top of their voices, an arrangement was effected; but not until Mr. Nicholson had consented to the financial details proposed by the grasping messenger. Each house in the street furnished at least one, and in many cases two, witnesses to their contract, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour. One small imp of seven offered to act as escort to

the messenger, provided Nicholson paid with equal liberality for his time and trouble. He fled, however, before the greengrocer, who made his way down the street towards the Queen's Head, scattering curses as loud as they were deep.

Arrived at his favourite tavern, he ordered a glass of spirits, and lighting his pipe, proceeded to brood over that mysterious action of the doctor. It was not mysterious to him long; a few minutes silent reflection served to show him the meaning. Nothing could be simpler. The doctor had turned up his nose; he had thrown the stuff away; why had he done so except to guard most securely against the medicine being inadvertently used?

Nicholson felt the need of opening his mind. He raised his shaggy head and let his small sunken eyes roam furtively round the room. The usual company were there; all smoking and drinking, some taking part in a political discussion which was rapidly growing heated; most of them taciturn and listless. No one had made any attempt to break in upon the greengrocer's reverie—his moods were too uncertain to be wantonly trifled with. However, when he raised his eyes, and it was observed that they looked comparatively calm, Mr. Tuggles,

who sat nearest, removed his pipe for an instant.

"How's your missis?" he asked.

Nicholson slowly shook his head. He continued to smoke in silence, and fixed an eye of much, if not easily read, meaning upon his friend.

Dick's purple cheeks and nose took on a deeper tint. He resented receiving no immediate answer to his well-meant inquiry. He again removed his pipe, this time for a longer interval, and discharged a vehement volley of oaths, emphasising the already emphatic with the application of his fist to the table.

"Tuggles, you was right," said Nicholson, solemnly.

"I'm allays right. What d'ye mean?" growled Dick.

"Ay, but you was righter than you've ever been in your life before."

"Well, that ain't saying much, surely," observed a small man.

"Hold *your* tongue, Bond—a man of your size might know better than to set up cheek." Mr. Tuggles delivered this caution and then turned sharply upon Nicholson, for suspense affected his temper. "D'ye mean about them — taters?" he demanded.

"Why no, of course I don't," said Nicholson. "Didn't I say at the time as you told a lie? And d'ye think I'm a goin' to say diff'runt now? And d'ye think *I* don't know a good tater when I sees it?"

"No, I don't think nothink of the kind. I only say *this*," said Dick, "that I wouldn't pay for the salt to cook a tater as come out o' your shop—let alone eat one, and my missis wouldn't take the trouble o' peelin' one—let alone puttin' it in the saucepan. I don't say as you don't know a good tater when you see it, 'cos you're allays precious careful not to set eyes on one. That's all I say."

"Well, and all I say is that the rubbish you take round on your truck ain't worth the dirt it grow'd in. There, that's all I say," said Nicholson.

A stern silence followed. Both men smoked with moody contracted brows and lowered eyes.

"Was it about them carrits then?" asked Dick, presently.

"Why, no, it worn't," said Nicholson, contemptuously.

"Them —— turnips then?"

"The turnips was all right. I ordered 'arf a load."

"Well, mebbe they'll be bought for pigs," said Dick, meditatively.

Conversation seemed threatened to come to a standstill. Nicholson, however, had something so interesting to say that he became magnanimous.

"No, Dick, it worn't none o' them things," he said, gloomily shaking his head. "When I want to know what's a good tater I shouldn't ask your advice, and similarly with carrits and turnips, you're the last man I'd go to. I've kep' shop for over twenty year, and I know how to buy in what the customers 'll buy. At business, they's few can beat me—I didn't begin to stand behind the counter only yesterday. But it's not that," sadly. "It's somethink far more important."

"Oh," said Tuggles, coldly. He appeared indifferent about hearing any more. He glanced round and stared with fixed interest at a man who entered just then.

"You was right about my wife."

"Oh," said Dick, as cruelly uninterested. He was watching the new-comer at the bar.

"And about doctors, you know."

"No, I don't know nothink," said Dick, shortly. "My way ain't your way, and the doctor I'd 'ave ain't the doctor you'd 'ave, and that's where it is."

"Wait a minute," said Nicholson, overlooking his friend's irritability with a lofty and impres-



sive patience and a slow wave of his pipe. "Wait a minnte, Tuggles," he repeated. "There's somethink as I want to ask your opinion on—yours and the others."

He then proceeded to give an account of the evening's events, not forgetting to throw in a graphic description of the luxury and beauty of Dr. Fullagher's table, also a bitter denunciation of the doctor's meanness in not offering him even "so much as a glass," and getting excited as he went on, he gave a highly-coloured picture of Dr. Fane's behaviour in the sick-room.

"What's a sensible man to think when he sees a doctor pour out stuff as if he was afraid of it bein' took by h'anyone?" he wound up with, looking round eagerly at the faces turned towards him.

"That he didn't want no one to take it—that's simple," said Bond, winking.

"But why should he be so mighty partickler?" cried Nicholson, excitedly. "Why—why he poured it out as if—as if it was poison!"

The word was spoken at last.

"What could you expect?" asked Tuggles, scornfully. "Didn't I tell yer? 'Course it were poison."

"Ay, what else could it be?" said one or two others thoughtfully.

"It's a mercy as you got the new doctor in time, Nicholson," added another.

This support of his own view—for he had quite succeeded in turning his desired suspicion into a conviction—and the sympathy for the supposed risk, had an elevating effect upon Nicholson. He felt himself a hero; and after vowing vengeance against Miss Romney, he fell to shedding tears over the thought of his Susan's narrow escape.

Next morning, when Edith called to see Mrs. Nicholson, her progress was barred by the ample figure of Mrs. Sparre, who stood with arms akimbo in the doorway between the shop and the kitchen.

"You needn't come no further, ma'am," she observed, with a tone and smile of ironical politeness.

"Why? What is the matter?" said Edith, in blank astonishment. Great as had been her experience of rebuffs she was not prepared for one at that moment. It flashed across her that a sudden and unexpected end had come to the case. She looked with quick inquiry at the coarse broad face of Mrs. Sparre. "Surely Mrs. Nicholson is not——"

Mrs. Sparre was watching her with huge enjoyment. She laughed aloud.

"Not dead, ma'am? oh, no, not yet. I dessay you expected to find her so, but Nicholson, here, ain't allays a fool, and he got the new doctor to her just in time. *He* knows what's what."

Nicholson had ensconced himself on the further side of the kitchen fire, in order to enjoy the discomfiture of his enemy, and to conduct it if necessary from his safe ambush.

"Tell her," he said, in husky sullen tones which yet had a touch of triumph, "tell her, Mrs. Sparre, that I ain't allays drunk."

Mrs. Sparre turned her head slightly over her shoulder.

"Why, you was drunk last night, Nicholson," she observed. "Not but what I've seen you a deal worse," she added, candidly.

"Tell her," went on Nicholson, in the same gruff husky voice, "as I went for a doctor as is a real doctor and not a sham. Tell her that, Mrs. Sparre!"

Mrs. Sparre merely supplemented a "There!" and fixed her eye on Miss Romney. The oracular remarks from the inner chamber were indeed quite audible.

"And tell her," said Nicholson, raising his voice with shaking passion, "tell her as a man may find it needful to beat his wife a bit now

and again, but he don't care to have her poisoned. Tell her that!" he shrieked.

"Why, Lord bless you," cried Mrs. Sparre, "d'ye suppose that she can't hear every word as you're talkin' on?"

"Will you ask Mr. Nicholson to come and speak to me," said Edith. Her clear tones fell on the ear with almost painful delicacy after the coarse voices of the man and woman.

There was a hasty movement within, followed by a muttered oath.

"There ain't no need for no talkin'," said Nicholson, sullenly. "Stand still as I telled you to, Mrs. Sparre. A lady as is a lady oughter know when to go when she's told plainly as she's not wanted—doctor or no doctor."

Edith paused one moment in deadly sickness of heart, and then turned silently away.

One or two people had entered the shop in order to enjoy the amusement of seeing and hearing the greengrocer "pitch into" the lady-doctor. They laughed at his last remark, and Edith felt their curious glances and broad grins as she walked past. Some dozen hung about the door waiting to see her re-issue. She passed between them, not looking at one, but conscious, cruelly conscious, of the hard staring eyes and the whispered remarks. She got into her

brougham, and threw herself back with closed eyes and a hard panting breath. A tap came at the window. In an agony of nervousness she started and looked towards the door first, expecting to see one of those cruel faces there—then saw it was only her coachman at the front. She had forgotten to tell him where to drive to. She hurriedly waved him on. Let it be anywhere to get out of sight and hearing of these people.

She attached no importance to the mention of the word poison—it was merely a chance accusation winged by the reckless malice of a mean nature which owed her a grudge. The charge of poisoning was too unlikely, too impossible. She knew perfectly well that Dr. Fane could have no line of truth on which to found such a statement. However greatly prejudiced he was against a woman who practised, and it seemed to her that he must be bitterly prejudiced, she was too true herself to imagine that even her unrelenting rival could be guilty of wilful misrepresentation.

The sting of truth in Nicholson's venomous shaft was not needed,—the cherished ill-will of the man, the coarse delight of his ally, the vulture-like gathering of those cruelly smiling people,—what more was needed to scorch her

heart, to make her tremble with the pang of a hard mortification, to blacken all the hopes she had placed upon these people—the hopes of working for them, healing and helping them.

They scorned the possibility of her possessing the very knowledge and skill which qualified her for doing this. They regarded her sneeringly as a sham, a make-believe. The scorn and the disbelief wounded her as deeply as any of the many disappointments which had wounded her these last few months. Mr. Nicholson and his friends were only the rough exponents of everyone's belief in her; they had only told her coarsely what the others showed her through the veils thought necessary and becoming by conventionality.

This was the sting. Had they rent her for anything else she felt she could have borne it. Had they turned against her as they sometimes turned in their ignorance and ingratitude against the men and women of mercy who spend their lives in the service of the poor, Edith knew that her courage would have served her to go on patiently, but they refused to have her in the only way that she could come to them. Elasticity of courage was unneeded in this case—there was simply nothing for it to fall back upon.

The low part of the town was left behind before Edwards stopped and, letting down the window, asked for further orders.

"Drive to the Cottage," said Edith.

There was no other patient on her sick-list.

Edwards touched his hat and put up the window as gravely and respectfully as he had done a hundred times. Was he wondering how long the farce would take to be played? she thought with a heart-breaking sense of desolation.

The story put into circulation by Nicholson rapidly spread. It was buzzed about and exaggerated, and very narrowly escaped the honour of publicity in the papers. And in process of time it of course reached the ears of Edith and Winifred, and to them it appeared the climax of the public's perverted opposition.

Mona brought the news, and was almost hysterical in her indignation.

"Did you ever hear anything so wicked—so utterly monstrous?" she exclaimed, clasping her hands and looking wildly from one to another. "When I first heard, I went into hysterics—I could *not* help it. It seems so utterly base and wicked. I hate people—I *hate* them! I wish I had never come into such a horrible, cruel, malicious, scandalous world. I told papa so. He wanted me to change—to go over to that



odious man. Papa always takes fright at once when he hears evil reports about people. He ought to be an old maid, not a widower about to marry. I told him I would *never* change my doctor. I vowed I hated Dr. Fane—I hated his sister—and I do, oh, I do with all my heart! Nothing will induce me to employ that man; and it isn't likely I should not have my own way when I am going to be married so soon and shall be my own mistress. Reginald says loftily, why should I mind people saying such things about you? Men out in the world have to put up with all sorts of disagreeables and lies and things, and as you are a doctor you ought to be prepared to fare the same."

"I ask no better," said Edith, with a faint fleeting smile.

"Well, one thing, Dr. Fane denies having said anything to lead to such a report," went on Mona. "Papa asked him last night. He says it is all invention. That is something. If he has any manly spirit at all he will deny it publicly in the market-place."

"Oh, if Dr. Fane has said so you need not mind, Aunt Edith," said Winifred, in high tones of vibrating scorn and agitation. "*His* word will be believed."

Fane had, indeed, been somewhat disturbed



on hearing the story. He was more angry and disgusted at Nicholson's wilful misrepresentation of his own slight action than shocked at the charge against Miss Romney. Had a similar charge been made against himself, he would have laughed it to scorn. He did not reflect that circumstances might make such indifference impossible for the lady. He was thoroughly angry at being mixed up in the absurd rumour, and contradicted it on every occasion. He also severely reprimanded and cautioned Mr. Nicholson, distinctly telling that worthy that the story was a lie, and that the sooner he set about undoing what his malicious tongue had done the better.

Dr. Fullagher was quite as much annoyed.

"Good Lord, hush it up as fast as you can, Fane," he said, irritably. "Or it will get into the papers and make a precious cackling. She will be publishing the prescription and challenging judgment from all the medical authorities in the kingdom. It will never do to have her made a martyr—if she does obtain the odour of sanctity, public opinion will turn in as many hours as the tide, and *you* may strike your tent, my friend. Go and stop that scoundrel's tongue, and tell him I should like to break his head."



## CHAPTER IX.

### DEFEAT.

“He sees her face.”—SPENSER.

“How beautiful, if sorrow had not made  
Sorrow more beautiful than Beauty’s self !  
There was a listening fear in her regard,  
As if calamity had but begun ;  
As if the vanward clouds of evil days  
Had spent their malice, and the sullen rear  
Was with its stored thunder labouring up.”

KEATS.

THE year drew to an end. On its last day Edith looked through her books and brought herself face to face with the fact that of all the wealthy practice that had been hers six months ago, only three people remained faithful to her—Miss Jacques, Mr. Stanforth, for his children, and Mona Milward. She shut her books, and paced up and down the consulting-room. It was evening. She might be as idle as she pleased ; but it was not the idleness brought by the close of the day—there had been no day’s

work before to make rest grateful to her. It was some weeks since she had made a full round, since professional engagements had occupied her time with the pleasurable pressure of haste and business. The house was deadly quiet, nor was there any probability of an interruption to the quiet,—there would be no hurried ringing of the front door-bell, no message to urge her immediate attendance. The world had put her on one side. She was not needed.

This last day of the year she had forced herself to examine the full extent of her losses. She had summoned all her courage to her aid, and had confronted the knowledge that had lain unrecognised in her mind—the knowledge that she had failed, both with the rich and with the poor. Still, she could not face the future—not yet. She had hardly acknowledged the self-evident consequence of her failure—the necessity for leaving Wanningster—she was too much absorbed with the conclusion indicated by these last six months, the “nay” that seemed “firmly fixed” against success in other places as well as in Wanningster. Her repeated losses were repeated proofs of the slighting estimation in which her powers were held—being only a woman’s—and she no longer struggled against belief in such proofs. Her courage had succumbed,

for the time being, at least. Practical arrangements would have to be made; but she put all thought of them from her. She could not think of the future; her mind seemed incapable of going beyond the present. The loss of her practice, failure in her chosen career, the mortifications of rejection, made a dead wall which blocked everything else out of sight.

It may seem strange to say that she felt unusually out of spirits this evening; yet even in the November dreariness of a soul there are times when the life is lowest—wan, weak hours of the spirit's day. She was beginning to suffer in health. She had fallen into a habit of waking after the first uneasy doze, and generally did so with a weight of oppression and undefined foreboding which would last for hours, and even recur to her during the daytime. She had begun to dread the nights which brought that vague terror to be her companion. And the days brought their own peculiar suffering. Idleness was a cruel experience. After the well-occupied life of her school and student days, and the last two years' practice, the enforced leisure chafed and distressed her. It was as if all at once she had lost her place, her motive for existence. She felt like an outcast from the ranks of the world's workers. The busy streets,

the moving life, all that used to cheer her, depressed her now by forcing upon her the feeling that she was only an outsider. What had been exhilarating when she was moving quickly amongst the workers as fully occupied as any, was fast becoming painful. Of two streets she deliberately chose the quieter, and she would cross to avoid meeting a knot of two or three.

Through all ran a constant mourning for her father. Not since time had softened the first acute misery of her grief had she suffered such an aching, ever-present sense of her loss. It seemed as if her sorrow had been cast into the background during her time of prosperity, and that now it had come once more to the front, strengthened, and relentlessly resolved to exact over again the anguish of bereavement.

She missed him in the little recurring matters of every day, as one misses a daily companion who has just gone away for a visit. The instincts of her childhood—its weakness, and dependence, and longing to pour out every trouble, and sob away every fear and burden upon a protecting, loving breast—these reawakened. It was to her an ever fresh disappointment not to see her father on her return home—not quite conscious, perhaps, of what it was she missed

on entering the house. She often wondered what he would say if he knew, and she heard, every day she heard the tender, compassionate tones of that—"I should be so sorry, Edie, darling." Those words carried to her ears a prophetic significance now.

She spent much of her time shut up alone. In the absorption of her own grief she was selfish for the first time in her life. Had she known that Winifred was unhappy, too, she would no doubt have made an effort to overcome her morbid shrinking from companionship. The affair with Oscar, however, appeared to have died a natural death. They seldom saw him now. There was nothing to keep remembrance of his unaccountable behaviour alive in Edith's mind—it was only natural to suppose she had been mistaken in thinking Winifred cared for him, or that it had been merely a passing fancy. There was, thus, nothing to draw her from her brooding thoughts. Her instinct was to keep out of sight and hearing. Her sorrow was too great to be spoken of. Even Winifred knew only part—she heard of no losses unless the patients' names were known to her. Edith never mentioned her patients—she could say nothing. Every one in the house must guess how things were going—there was no possibility of hiding

her failure—the absence of callers, the unused and unneeded consulting-room, the lessening rounds, all told their tale. She read their knowledge in Edwards' grave deference, in Sarah's gentleness and absolute silence on the subject—for when "trouble" was in a house Sarah forgot all her little worries—and sometimes she writhed under the intolerableness of it; more often she was too benumbed to care or think about it at all.

She had made no changes in her household, and it speaks volumes for the repressive influence of Sarah's sympathy that it withheld her from grumblings about the unnecessary expense of horse and man. Needless expenditure was terrible to her as it is to all careful souls; but she suffered in silence, and so anxious was she not to betray her sentiments on the subject, that she treated Edwards with punctilious civility—a circumstance suspicious in itself, for Sarah's manners to the opposite sex were rather severe than genial.

Perhaps in Edith's inability to form new plans there was something of the constancy and honour that oblige a captain to stay to the last upon his sinking ship. Two or three still depended upon her for medical attention—Mona often ailed, Miss Jacques's was a chronic case, and at



the present time little Conrad Stanforth was ill enough to require daily visits. Edith had seen him that morning, and had promised to look in again in the evening.

Presently she stopped in her slow, dragging walk up and down, and looked at her watch. It was seven, time to start for her walk to the Rectory, and she went up-stairs to dress.

Winifred came out of the drawing-room, looking pale and sad, and, following her aunt into her bed-room, saw with loving anxiety that she dressed warmly enough. Edith rewarded her solicitude with a kiss.

"You look dull, dear—why don't you practise some songs for to-morrow evening? I am glad we are going out, for your sake."

"And I don't know whether I am glad or sorry," said Winifred, with a little laugh of weary bitterness. She went back to the drawing-room when Edith had gone, and to her seat by the fire, making no attempt to follow the suggestion about practising, but sitting down with idle hands, without even a book to occupy her. She had sat thus since tea. The studies and accomplishments which used to fill her hours so busily and happily had become wearisome and flavourless. The old, pleasant employments had lost their charm—not music, nor painting,



nor any of her literary studies could satisfy that hunger and ceaseless disappointment of her heart. She could not understand the tyranny of "this thing, love"; she suffered all its craving bitterness and unrest with a continual and pathetic protest against the aching pain. She summoned pride to her help; but pride proved at best only a fickle ally, occasionally lending her the fictitious strength of anger and self-contempt, and then suddenly deserting her in times of sorest need.

This evening she was restless and excited. The "going out" mentioned by Edith was to the Milwards', the "last reception of that unfortunate victim, Mona Milward," as described by Mona herself, and Oscar Ardley would most probably be there. It was some weeks since she had seen him, and Winifred looked forward to meeting him with agitated and conflicting feelings—she longed to see him again, and yet dreaded doing it. She almost hoped that on seeing him after this unusually long interval she might find she did not really care so much, and that in time it would be possible not to care at all.

The weather was cold and frosty. A week-old snow lay white and firm outside the town, in the streets it was trodden into black, caked powder. The prospect of a thaw promised a

doleful period of slush and mire. The ordinary bustle of New Year's eve was astir; the streets were full of hurrying people, the shops were gaily decorated and brilliantly lighted. To Edith, it was a relief to pass from the thronged and blazing thoroughfares into the older, quieter and shopless regions near St Matthew's.

She was taken as usual straight up to Con's room, where she was joined in two minutes by the Reector. This was a surprise, for she very seldom saw him—so seldom, indeed, that a suspicion had once crossed her mind that he also had been favoured with the fact of the coupling of their names in the gossips' mouths. Anxiety about his little son evidently weighed heavily upon him. His melancholy countenance wore its most harassed expression, and since his wife's death he had looked doubly careworn. He stood at the foot of the bed, gazing so mournfully at the child lying flushed in feverish stupor, that Edith felt sorry for him. She knew he was devotion's self where his children were concerned, especially now, when he was in the place of both father and mother to them.

"He has lain like that nearly the whole afternoon and evening," he murmured dejectedly.

"I don't think he is any worse," said Edith.

Con stirred at her voice, opened his heavy

eyes, and smiled with weak pleasure as the lids fell once more, and his little hand clasped two of her fingers.

"He is no better," said Mr. Stanforth.

"Not yet—the fever must run its course."

The Rector sighed his deepest. He drew Miss Romney into the nursery when they left Conrad. The children had gone to bed. The nurse was folding up some things and tidying the toy-strewn room. Mr. Stanforth requested her to leave the room for a few minutes. He mechanically offered Edith a seat, but did not sit down himself.

"I feel very anxious about Conrad," he said, in his dull hopeless voice.

"He is very ill, certainly, but there is no need for you to be at all apprehensive—there is no danger. That is to say," she added, with that pathetic hesitation which had replaced the once sure confidence, "as far as I, a mere human being, can judge."

"Ah!" said the Rector, drawing out the syllable like a wailing sigh. "But you see I feel the responsibility so much."

"I am sure you must," said Edith, with gentle sympathy.

The Rector was never fluent. This evening he appeared to find a peculiar difficulty in framing his remarks. He stooped and picked up a doll

lying in great disarray of costume nearly at his feet, and smoothed away the untidiness with neat, deliberate fingers.

"The responsibility is grievously heavy," he said,—*"grievously heavy. I am alone, and it all falls upon me. I feel very despondent at times. You can understand, I am sure, Miss Romney. You knew—her so well."*

Edith's eyes filled with tears. "Yes," she said, softly.

Mr. Stanforth raised his mild sunken eyes from the doll's dress to the lady before him. Edith was looking past him with dreamy eyes, the remembrance of her lost friend softening and melting them to even rarer beauty. She sat leaning slightly sideways, with her elbow on the table and her cheek upon her hand, the contour of the saddened face and every lovely line of feature seen delicately in the subdued light and relieved against the frame of the dark fur hat, the dark hair, and the fur which came up closely about her throat.

"Mr. Stanforth, looking with intention, saw her goodliness, and, seeing it, even he, abstracted, blind creature that he was, yielded it the homage of a full half minute's gaze. Then he reddened ever so little, and cast down his eyes in abject remorse for this indulgence.

"That's what has made the talk," he thought, in nervous alarm.

"Therefore," said he, speaking with embarrassment, "I have decided that it would be more satisfactory in every way to have a second opinion on this illness of Conrad's. His state seems to remain—stationary; the feverish symptoms hang about him with alarming persistence. What do you say, Miss Romney? It is done every day, I assure you. I do not intend any slight to you or—or—or your skill. I know too well how good a friend you have proved yourself both to my dear wife and to her children—I can—I shall never forget. But—but I feel wretchedly uneasy, and I should be glad to have the advantage of a second opinion. You would not object to meet Dr. Fane in consultation, I presume?"

Edith had not moved once as he spoke, only the tender mournfulness faded out of her eyes and they dilated and darkened. The proposal was unexpected; it startled her. Meet Dr. Fane in consultation?—in imagination she saw the half-concealed scorn and amusement of what would appear to her pitiless rival only a mockery of a consultation. This was worse, far worse to bear than learning the simple fact of a patient's leaving her. She rose from her chair.

"I quite understand, Mr. Stanforth," she said,

and there was no touch of offence in her grave tones, only a curious undertone of something like appeal as she added—"But do you think Dr. Fane will consent to meet me?"

"Refuse to meet a lady?" echoed the Rector, whose notions of politeness were quite as precise as his notions of tidiness.

A faint colour rose in Edith's cheek.

"Oh," she said, "that is sunk in the profession in such a case. I only know that he does not believe in lady-doctors."

"Ah, well," said the Rector, who invariably avoided any public or social question. "Let me see. I will write to Dr. Fane this evening, and you—you will call here at your usual time to-morrow morning? Thank you. Thank you very much for being so kind and so—so—" he was about to add "reasonable," but checked himself just in time.

"Very seasonable weather, is it not?" he said, as they left the room. "A thaw is predicted, however, and though for my own part I prefer frost, I think that for the sake of our poorer fellow-creatures we should welcome a less rigorous severity of temperature."

"Yes," said Edith. "It is sad to think that what gives us pleasure brings only suffering to the poor."

“Wanningster is pretty well provided with coal and blanket societies, but one may say with Philip—‘What are they among so many?’” said the Rector, mournfully, as he opened the front door. “Good evening, Miss Romney. Give my kind regards to Miss Noel.”

The door was closed. That part of the street lay in shadow. No light gleamed from the closely-curtained windows of the Rectory. Edith paused when she had gone a few steps and looked back at the house. It was the first she had entered professionally in Wanningster—it had kept faithful to her the longest. The sound of the closing door seemed ominous of a change. She turned away cold and dull at heart, and walked slowly homewards.

In desperation at the monotonous round of her dreary musings, Winifred had finally taken refuge at the piano, and was softly singing when Edith returned. She stopped upon her aunt’s entrance into the drawing-room and asked if she were not very cold.

“It is bitterly cold,” said Edith, shivering. “But go on, Winnie, I like to hear you.”

The fire was a bed of glowing coals, and sinking upon the low chair drawn near, Edith crouched over it. Presently, when warmth had brought physical comfort and made even that



tight oppression upon her heart ease itself a little, she grew conscious of what Winnie was singing. It was her great favourite—‘O rest in the Lord.’

The girl's voice was low and full, feeling trembled almost to breaking in the pathetic patience of the iterated ‘Rest in the Lord.’ Edith lay back in her chair with clasped hands, not voluntarily listening, only hearing now and again a sacred phrase of melody which in its holy assurance swept across her darkly-troubled heart as a dove across black storm-clouds. But the storm stirring in her heart was too recently aroused, too overpowering to be stilled by any suggestion of peace. Her misfortune overwhelmed her. ‘Rest in the Lord’ repeated the sweet vibrating voice. Rest?—for the restless un comforted heart, which turn what way it might found only pain and denial; which had been encouraged only it would seem to be cast down the lower; what rest could make up for this? She had asked for work, for full-grown interests and usefulness, for life, and passive waiting was offered instead. “Wait patiently,” she heard—was obliged to hear, though the words startled and dismayed her. Patience? Oh, that was impossible! How could she be patient? Patience meant acquiescence, a humble yielding up. Could



she submit patiently to losing all that gave meaning and interest to her life?—to having her aspirations denied?—to giving up the exercise of her powers? Could she tutor herself to accept patiently only the dull ordinary life allotted to most women?—the monotonous routine of a bystander, not a worker, in the world? “Commit thy way unto Him”—the requirement terrified her. It might be yielding up *her* way. And then the promise—to her it was a mockery. Her heart’s desire was already taken from her. In the anguish of her spirit she pressed her hands together, and bowed down her face upon them. She did not cry. She had no tears—no thought nor wish for tears. She bowed her head, shrinking from the music, which struck her in each hard phrase as a heavy wave might strike a drowning creature. The rest, the peace, the help, the promise, were not for her. And the last sweet ‘O rest in the Lord’ died away, leaving Edith trembling from head to foot.

She rose early next morning after a sleepless night, and spent the time before breakfast in walking up and down the consulting-room. She had first tried to read, but had found the effort useless. At breakfast she shielded herself from talk and observation behind the ‘Daily Advertiser,’ reading as little as she ate. After the

meal she made a second attempt to study—an attempt which resulted in her clasping her hands upon her brow and staring with a fixed dismay at the page of confusion before her, where the technical terms were meaningless and the sentences mere word-puzzles. She closed the book, put it carefully back in its place on the shelf, and looked at the solid row of medical works. They were studied in her college days with the keenest enjoyment and enthusiasm. She turned away now with a quivering lip.

She went into the next room and joined Winifred at her sewing. But the work soon dropped from her fingers—the monotony of sitting still and making minute stitches fretted her. She gazed out of the window awhile, unseeingly, and then got up and moved restlessly about the room.

It was something new indeed to see Edith restless and at a loss for occupation—she who had earned the masculine prerogative of idleness in the house and was generally too busy to exercise it. Winifred paused with suspended needle to see her open the sideboard drawers one after another and slightly turn over their contents.

“Are you looking for anything, Auntie?”

“No, oh no—nothing,” hastily shutting a drawer.

“Perhaps,” said Winifred, with attempted cheerfulness, “you are thinking they are very untidy. I do owe them a thorough setting to rights—I will do it to-day. Don’t you trouble, Auntie, dear.”

“Why should I not?” said Edith, a touch of irritability edging her voice.

“Because it’s woman’s work, and I’m the woman in this house,” replied Winifred, lightly.

“Perhaps I shall come to you some day and ask for a share,” said Edith, with a laugh that was more a sob.

“There is too little to divide,” said Winifred, holding up the tablecloth she was darning against the light to search for further occupation for her needle. “Housework is not so elastic as people generally imagine.”

“Half-past ten,” said Edith, hurriedly. “The brougham will be round at once—I must get ready.”

She abruptly left the room.

Winifred thought she looked pale and tired when she came down again and stood drawing on her gloves.

“I hope poor little Con will be better this morning,” she said, cheerfully.

But Edith did not hear; she went out absently without a word. Her heart was beating nervously

as the carriage rattled over the stony streets. She felt that a curiously disagreeable ordeal lay before her, and was only too sure how unequal her spirits and composure were for any extra demand upon them.

The servant appeared surprised to see her, hesitated a moment, and then led the way into the drawing-room. This was only what Edith expected; the introduction between her and Dr. Fane would of course take place before they saw the patient. The room was empty, cold, and in the rigid order of disuse. She cast a quick glance at the couch which stood in its old place.

"Ah, if she had been alive I should never have been asked to meet him," she thought, bitterly and sadly.

And then the Rector entered, and hurriedly shook hands. He looked exceedingly uncomfortable, more embarrassed than on the previous evening.

"Ah, good morning, Miss Romney. How d'ye do? Wretched weather, is it not?—bitterly cold"—he said in a great flurry. "Sit down, won't you sit down," pushing forward a chair. "Ah, I'm afraid there's some little mistake—er—did you not receive my note?"

"No, I have received no note." Edith stopped

as she was about to take the offered chair and put her hands on the back instead.

"Dear, dear, how unfortunate, how extremely annoying! The post would have been safer after all,—but I considered there might be some delay, and that a messenger would be surer. I was especially desirous that you might receive it in time in order to save you the trouble of calling."

"Save me the trouble?" repeated Edith. "But I thought—I thought it was arranged for me to call this morning as usual?"

"Certainly it was," replied Mr. Stanforth, fidgeting his nervous hands. "Certainly it was. I wished you to call most assuredly in order to meet Dr. Fane in consultation, but—really it is very disagreeable; I assure you I am greatly—greatly perturbed. The fact is, Miss Romney, I called last evening upon Dr. Fane and explained my request, but he—er—he, in short, refused to comply." He paused.

"Yes?" said Edith.

"Yes. It seems he has what one may term a strong prejudice against lady medical practitioners—a man cannot altogether help his opinions, you know. He does not believe in them, he said, and very frankly added that such being the case he feared he could only regard a consultation such as the one I proposed as—as—a farce, I

think was the word he used. He is a little plain-spoken undoubtedly," added the Rector, thoughtfully. "He would only take the case on the condition that it was put unreservedly into his hands, and of course in a matter where such gravely important issues are at stake there was only one course open to me. I felt obliged to accept his skill on the proposed terms, although," and the Rector fidgeted in a sort of climax of nervousness, and reddened as he shot a quick glance at the beautiful listening face—"although I felt keenly the apparent ungraciousness to *you*, Miss Romney, after your intense, your unfailing kindness to me and mine—"

She made a gesture of deprecation. The Rector's persistence about her kindness and his uneasy glances and embarrassment convinced her that he had heard the talk mixing up their names and had taken fright. It was an added mortification to find that he should think it necessary to guard against a vulgar construction of their acquaintance when she had not done so. She could not help some of the contempt she felt showing in her face as she mutely deprecated these acknowledgments. Mr. Stanforth faltered and broke down in them altogether.

"*Therefore*," said he, plunging back into his explanation, "I wrote this morning and sent the

letter fully an hour ago. You ought to have received it in time, but the messenger, I fear, has loitered by the way. I wished to save you time and trouble."

The last sentence sounded like a mockery.

Edith had listened gravely and courteously, with downcast eyes, as she stood behind the chair, her hands clasping its back for support. Now she moved in a dull, mechanical way.

"I should like to say good-bye to the children," she said, half absently. "And to see Con—as a friend only," she added.

"Assuredly," said the Rector, in a flurry, pulling the bell. He was surprised. He had expected reproaches, lamentations, perhaps tears, certainly a scene of some kind. He was almost bewildered at his good fortune in being let off so easily; yet, strange to say, he did not feel as relieved or comfortable as he should have done. A cold suspicion that he was not behaving well to her entered his mind; his precautionary measures appeared after all unneeded, and they struck him too late as being unpleasantly like an insult to her; he felt small, he felt ashamed. He turned from the bell, apology and regrets in his heart, stammering words on his tongue, and uttered them without daring to look above the fur on her long jacket.



"But I hope, Miss Romney, I sincerely hope, that, that, you will not deprive the children of your friendship?"

"Perhaps you will kindly let them come to see me sometimes," she said, with sweet dignity. Then she held out her hand. "Good-morning, Mr. Stanforth. I need not trouble the servant; I know the way."

She had gone, and the Rector went and shut himself safely up in his study. If she broke down over bidding his children farewell he would at least be out of the way.

It was some satisfaction to Edith to notice an improvement in Con's state. He spoke and wanted her to stay with him. She next looked into the nursery and kissed each child, but did not utter the word good-bye—the outcry, the explanation it would have caused were better avoided.

As she descended the stairs, the housemaid was crossing the hall, and, seeing her, opened the front door. Just as Edith left the house a brougham drove up, the door was flung open, and Fane sprang out. Edith was mechanically crossing the pavement, for she had not noticed that Edwards had walked his horse down the street, and they met for an instant face to face. Fane's quick eye took in the tall graceful figure



in its heavy fur-trimmed jacket, the pale beautiful face in the frame of shadowy hair and dark fur, with every feature finely cut, the mouth slightly compressed and drooping, the eyes darkened and widened by the expression of almost appealing despair. Their eyes met, and at once recognition came into each mind. The unseeing look vanished, she turned her head with sharp quickness and walked swiftly to meet her returning carriage.

While Fane strode past the servant who was holding the door open for him, and wiped his feet on the mat with the startled look of a man who has seen a vision.

“He stalked into the house,” said Mary after to the cook, “as if he’d attended the family for years. There wasn’t as much as a ‘His your master at ’ome?’”





## CHAPTER X.

### THE EVENING AFTER.

FANE was engaged to dine with Dr. Fullagher that evening. The doctor took it hardly if his perfect little dinners were not shared by his friend at least three evenings out of the seven, and it was quite an understood thing that when Sibyl went out alone—and so popular a young lady had numerous engagements—her brother should go in next door.

Dr. Fullagher was in capital spirits this evening. There were several reasons for his cheerfulness. He had been lately threatened with the gout, and had managed for this time at least to avert a visit from his enemy; a sick pigeon, mourned and doctored by him for the last two days, was now convalescent; the thaw was beginning in earnest; he had bought that morning a valuable work on birds, the perusal of which promised him a fine and huge enjoyment;

and, lastly, a savage attack on the Government in his favourite London paper, had warmed the cockles of his heart. Nor was there wanting the crowning satisfaction of an exceptionally well-cooked and well-chosen dinner; and, moreover, it was a triumph to be able to enjoy his favourite dishes once more without unpleasant reminders in his foot of a price to be paid; while the chief points of attack against those in office were doubly enjoyable when related to a companion. For the doctor was no Diogenes in his mirth. Fane so far had been a companion after his own heart. Many a delightful hour had they spent together. His friend's society had added a great charm to the doctor's days. The cynical pleasure found in studying the follies and foibles of his neighbours was greatly enhanced when the stores of his observation could be poured into an appreciative ear. Watching Fane's progress also added a keen interest to his enjoyment—to see his former patients forsake his rival one by one, and to guess at the little vanities and trivial motives prompting their change, caused him an exquisite satisfaction.

For once, however, Fane ran a terrible risk of forfeiting the doctor's good opinion about his society. He was not responsive; he was even absent-minded.

Dr. Fullagher perceived the difference immediately. In the glow of his good spirits he had speedily made Fane acquainted with the gratifying items mentioned above, and Fane had expressed in return satisfaction and congratulation. Still there was a want. His sympathy lacked its usual full and easy flow. Fullagher eyed him discontentedly from under his shaggy brows. He even fancied his friend was not paying David's cooking the compliment of the hearty appetite demanded by his present brilliant success.

As soon as dessert was on the table and Samuel had noiselessly closed the door, the doctor came to the point with characteristic directness.

"You are not in a good temper," he observed, filling his glass. "And yet you come fresh from a new triumph."

"I wish to heaven I didn't," muttered Fane.

"Dear me!" mildly ejaculated the other. Then he added in a tone half regretful, half reproving—"Ah, I fancied you shirked my congratulations just now."

"A pitiful sort of triumph—winning bread from a woman!"

Dr. Fullagher twisted his hand in his beard and regretfully examined his friend.

"Do you know, I feared you would come to regard the matter in that light," he said. "You are a fantastic medley, my friend. One would be rash in predicting any course of action you might take—it is generally a toss up whether you will play the part of Levite or Samaritan. I am only astonished that the change in your feelings has been delayed so long."

"Well!—I like that!"

"I don't, on the contrary. The struggle amused me. May I ask—without danger of irritating you unduly—what has caused this—this—er—sudden change? You started on your rounds in a perfectly healthy frame of mind."

"Eh?—oh, I've seen her," was the absent rejoinder.

"Really? at last! I wish I had been there. I should have liked to witness this meeting between the two enemies. I have a great liking for a truly dramatic 'scene-turning.' May an irreverent outsider—who would gladly have paid a handsome entrance fee—make humble inquiries as to time and place? The Rector is a man of peace; was he what Hubbles, next door, would describe as the 'divine instrument' on this occasion?"

"It was most unfortunate," said Fane, dis-regarding these scoffs. He leaned back in his

chair with a flushed, frowning face, and drummed impatiently with his fingers on the table. "Nothing could have been more unfortunate. She was just leaving the Rectory as I drove up. Her brougham was half way down the street. She did not notice that the first moment. I met her close. I had almost to pass her to go into the house from which I had turned her out. The servant had caught sight of me, and was holding the door open—I was tempted to beat a hasty retreat—to call out to the girl I had made a mistake, and to hide myself in the brougham and get out of the street, but—"

"Quixotic—like you," commented Dr. Fulagher, "but hardly effective as a deception. Miss Romney would know you had been called in."

"Of course she would," said Fane, with warm disgust. "That's just the devil of it. That fool Stanforth should have managed better. Brutality itself could not have timed that meeting more neatly."

"Oh, as to that!—A woman who leaves her own sphere and proper work must prepare herself for the mortifications and hard dealings the world awards to all its workers."

The doctor stroked his beard in amusement at his own sententiousness. He smiled, and hid

the smile by raising a flowing lock before his lips, over which he glanced to watch the effect on his friend.

Fane uttered an impatient ejaculation.

"She is not a 'woman' in that sense. As soon as I saw her, I knew we had been fatally mistaken—she is in no way related to the shrieking sisterhood."

"You saw a great deal."

Fane made no answer to this. He was gazing thoughtfully into his glass.

"I was about to ask," continued the doctor—"for, vividly as you have described the meeting, there is some baldness of detail—I was about to ask what there is in her appearance to cause such a peculiar effect upon a well-balanced mind. What is she like?"

"I only saw her for a moment."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Fullagher. He drank off a glass of wine. "Good Lord!" he repeated, faintly. "The Amazon has conquered Achilles!"

"For God's sake don't use those names!" said Fane, pushing back his chair and rising hastily.

The doctor looked up at him in unfeigned wonder. The handsome face was strangely troubled.

"You forget the tragic end of that story," said Fane, and then as if ashamed of his disturbance

he walked to the hearthrug and stood looking down into the fire.

"Tragic, indeed," murmured Fullagher, recovering from his surprise with a wicked smile. "What a cruel jester is old Fate! Here is this man, who has been followed by good luck itself from the moment he set foot in this abominable congregation of fools, overtaken by the most unlucky thing that can befall a man!—the most damnably unlucky thing!" he cried, bringing down his fist upon the table with a force that set the glasses ringing.

"What do you mean?" said Fane, turning sharply round.

"Mean! What's the good of asking what I mean? If there's to be any meaning it should come from you—but, damn it all, don't attempt to find any!—for the sake of all that's sane don't let us have any raving!" and he pushed back his chair violently, and strode towards his cigar-case lying on the mantelpiece. He laid his hand for a moment on his friend's shoulder, and looked at him mockingly. "Take a sedative to-night," said he, nodding.

"*You* seem disturbed."

"Not at all. Here—have one of these. They are very soothing," politely offering a cigar. But Fane excused himself from smoking with



his host. He mentioned letters which claimed his attention.

“Go,” said the doctor, savagely, as he struck a light. “You are a lost man. You are worth no more as a companion. You need not perjure yourself. Go!”

And Fane accepted the gracious dismissal.

Sibyl was spending the evening at the Milwards.

The house was quiet and dull. The light was lowered in the library, where he always sat when alone, and the fire was nearly out. The silence and solitude and gloom were grateful to his present mood; he closed the library door and threw himself into his easy chair, leaving the gas as he found it, and the fire to take care of itself.

The day had been an extremely busy one. A heavy morning round, two messages for rather long distances, and dispensing, had kept him fully occupied until a quarter to eight, when he had made a hasty toilet and gone in next door. It had been one breathless rush of work, one constant succession of outside claims distracting and preventing private thought. Yet, amidst all the demands upon his time and attention, there had been the conscious presence of a something new and disturbing. As he threw himself

into his chair, he felt that now he had time to breathe, time to gather his faculties together, time to realise what this strange, new, overmastering sensation was, and he felt, too, some excitement at the prospect of this quiet, breathing time, and the fact he might discover in it.

His thoughts, however, were in too great disorder to come at a moment's bidding; they strayed off dreamily—as they had done several times already that day in the pauses of professional occupation, as he drove from one house to another—to ponder over a certain woman's face which he had seen that morning only for a moment, and which had haunted him since. He had not been able to get it out of his mind—the pale features, the dark eyes, with that broken-hearted sadness looking out as it were in almost fearful questioning, and the drooping dejected lips, were stamped upon his memory. Again came the vivid remembrance of her as she issued from the Rectory, and with a smothered ejaculation he sprang up and began pacing about the room.

Why had not that idiot Stanforth managed better? he thought, with fierce indignation. There must have been atrocious neglect in his arrangements for anything so unfortunate to happen. Surely no painful circumstance had been left out in the affair!—refused a meeting in

consultation, dismissed from the house, confronted at the very moment of defeat by the successful rival who had caused it! He wished with all his heart that he had put his visit to little Con. Stanforth at the end of his morning's work instead of at the beginning. And if he had?—he would not have seen her,—perhaps would never have seen her. He was not as Quixotic as the doctor fancied,—he felt bitterly sorry for the pain to her of that meeting, but he could not honestly say that he wished it had not taken place. Now he *had* seen her he would not be without the sight.

Indeed, a perfect craving was upon him to see her again. He was hungry for another glimpse of her face, for more than a glimpse, if possible. He wanted to look at those sad beautiful eyes, to see them look at him—to see the finely-cut lips and delicate eyebrows, to hear her speak, to see her move,—he wanted to rid himself of the statue-like personification of sorrow impressed upon his mind, to see her breathe and move in a more everyday mood. And the probability of this longing remaining unsatisfied did not lessen its strength by any means. He had lived in the same town with her for more than six months, and had not seen her till this morning's chance encounter. He had done a fair amount of

visiting on the whole, but at no house, except the Milwards', had he run any risk of meeting her; and he appreciated with hearty ferocity the thoroughness of the townspeople's partisanship. No; there seemed little hope of his seeing her again. And, supposing the remote possibility of a meeting did occur, what then? What acquaintance could there be between them? Why, she must hate him!—hate his name alone!—it would surely be positive pain to her to see him at all.

He stopped short in his restless pacings. The room was too small for that kind of exercise to be taken comfortably; the walls oppressed him. He threw the door open, and crossed the hall to the drawing-room, which was a much larger and longer room, and began to pace its length.

Sibyl had left the usual traces of her presence in the charming disorder near her seat by the fire—her fancy-work thrown down on a chair, her dainty work-basket open, and half its contents scattered on the table and floor, the third volume of a new novel kept partly open by a pair of scissors. Fane paused once in his walk past the small wilderness, and mechanically stooped to pick up a bundle of delicately-tinted silks lying on the carpet. He laid it on the table, and as he did so his eye fell on the corner

of a photograph protruding from the confused heap half out of the basket. As absently as he had picked up the silks, he took out the photograph, and as soon as he had done so an exclamation broke from his lips—for Edith Romney's face looked out at him. Sibyl had taken a fancy to the photograph and bought it, and, like the careless creature she was, had tucked it away in her basket and forgotten it.

Fane carried it to another table nearer the light, and there sat down to examine it feature by feature, and line by line. The likeness had been taken nearly nine months ago, before his visit to Wanninger in May, and what chiefly struck him after that first hungry inspection was the change of expression. He saw her here as she had been before his shadow darkened her path, when she was at the height of her worldly prosperity. She was taken leaning over the back of a chair, half length, her head slightly thrown back. The eyes were here shining with bright frank confidence, the lips were slightly smiling in their sweet seriousness. She was so beautiful, she looked so gentle and noble, so full of quiet strength and power and even chastened happiness—Fane could but look at the pictured face of nine months ago, and contrast it with the real one of to-day.

His lips trembled at the change. How could these wretched people throw her over?—how could they ever forget to be grateful to her for having come near them to do what could be done for their miserable bodies?—They were surely a set of the blindest, most self-consequent creatures that ever crawled! It seemed unreasonable to blame himself for their defection—any other man would have won them from her—but strict reason is not always the most powerful guide of thought, he—not any other man—had ruined her practice, and that fact made him feel guilty and blameworthy. And then, too, he was well aware of the deliberate intention of his rivalry, and of all his hard, contemptuous thoughts and words about her,—he covered the photograph with his hands and bent down his face upon them. If only he could undo!—why had he not seen her before?—it was the most malicious freak ever played by fate, the tardy timing of this morning's glimpse.

The remembrance of Violet did not even recur to him; the affection she had won from him, the admiration such as is given to a sweet and pretty child, grew faint as a star at sunrise before the passion of love and remorse that had fallen upon him.

A peal at the house-bell roused him. He started up and thrust the *carte* into a writing-case lying near, and opened a book, expecting Walter to enter with a message. It was only a call for medicine, however. Walter's steps died away in the back regions, and silence fell once more upon the house. The interruption reminded Fane that he had promised to go to Mr. Milward's for an hour or so before bringing Sibyl away. He was strongly tempted to be called out by a patient, and to send that excuse with the carriage later. In his restless state of mind the chatter to be enjoyed in the Milwards' drawing-room bore too painful a resemblance to the crackling of thorns under a pot. But better thoughts prevailed—he decided to keep his promise. No hope of seeing Miss Romney influenced his decision—they had always contrived to miss each other in that house; it was not to be expected that an exception to this rule would be made on this particular evening, but he might hear her name mentioned, he might even see her niece. Winifred was not the rose, but she lived so close to the rose.

What was he to do with the photograph?—put it back in its former resting-place?—the



idea of leaving it in such careless guardianship was not to be endured. Sibyl might miss her property, or she might not—she deserved to lose it; and Fane took it into the library and locked it away in his desk.

Arrived at No. 1, Princess Road, he found the drawing-room pretty well-filled. Mona, who generally left her guests to amuse each other, leaned back in a corner of the couch, languid and indifferent, allowing Jack to talk rather than answering his well-meant efforts. She gave the late guest a listless hand, and made some scoffing remark about the honour he did them. Mona was no adept in controlling her feelings, and she had never taken the trouble to hide from Fane the fact that he was no favourite with her. She called him conceited; she grudged him his good looks, his pleasant manners, his popularity, and his successes, and always infused a certain dryness into her tone when addressing him. Fane in return laughed at her as an oddity (and a rather disagreeable one), and did not enjoy her society. He stood by her side a while and looked round the room.

The first glance showed him that there was the usual set and no more. He had expected no more, and yet he was disappointed. There



was a monotony in Wanningster society, the disposition of groups was like an oft-seen picture,—the quartette at whist, the lively group of Chutterworth and Warren girls with the curate, a young Warren, and Reginald Milward, ostensibly playing at some round card game, but devoting their serious energies to talking, laughing and flirtation, and a pair at the piano. Mr. Milward was missing; Fane supposed therefore that he was dilating upon his latest “interest” to his betrothed or some other victim in the next room, and suffered no uneasiness. Mr. Milward’s father-in-law elect had of course been disposed of at the whist-table, he and Miss Harrison against Mrs. West and Winifred. The first pair played earnestly and keenly, and presented a contrast to the second. Mrs. West cared nothing for the game. Her smile was equally bland whether she won or lost. She glanced about much oftener than Mr. Robinson approved, and indeed the emphasis of his — “It’s your turn, Mrs. West” — “Mrs. West, we wait for you” — was only by an extraordinary effort of self-control kept from being openly impatient.

Winifred studied her cards very attentively—the occupation they gave her was a relief, but it was with great difficulty she followed the

game. At the same time, she was painfully anxious to play well, to give no occasion for the rampant and eager Mr. Robinson to draw her attention, or to chuckle, as was his wont when one of his opponents played carelessly. Through all her nervous care she saw the two at the piano, and heard the talk and laughter going on so gaily between them. She was conscious of every look of the fair brilliant Sibyl, as she sat turning over the leaves of some songs, and smiling radiantly up at Oscar Ardley who leaned over the piano.

Mona noticed what went on with shrewd insight. She was sorry for Winifred and angry with Oscar and Sibyl. She wished her father had not invited the Fanes—their presence could only be distasteful to her two friends.

“What is the good of talking about neutral ground?” thought Mona, with disgust, as she answered Fane’s remarks in unusual monosyllables, and cast languid glances of reprobation in the direction of the piano. “When things get to such a pass there can be only annoyance in their meeting like this.”

There was a rustle and a breeze, and Miss Robinson made her entrance from the next room, a radiant apparition in red. She ap-

proached with the usual commotion that attended her progress, overturning a light chair with the sweep of her flounced skirts, and laughing a loud "thank you" at Jack as he picked it up.

She shook hands with Fane in the same vigorous way, and dropped into the other corner of the sofa, remarking she was "quite exhausted."

"I hope you have been edified," drawled Mona, who on the approach of her step-mother-elect looked what the other declared herself to be.

Miss Robinson laughed. "My dear," she exclaimed, "I haven't understood a word!"

"That is gratifying for papa," murmured Mona.

"I never *did* care to hear lectures," continued Adelaide, fanning herself with an energy that made Mona's untidy hair fly about. "And I don't think private ones are any more interesting—if as interesting. One could look at the people at public lectures when one got tired of listening."

"What is the subject of this evening's discourse?" inquired Fane.

"Geology," said Mona, curtly.

"Ah."

"Doesn't it tempt you?" she asked.

"Oh, Dr. Fane will enjoy it! He is clever—very different to poor me," cried Miss Robinson. "Frederick—I mean Mr. Milward," correcting herself with an affected little laugh, "is showing some pretty photographs—they are really nice, and his explanations are quite interesting—at least," she added, tapping Fane's arm archly with her fan, "at least they would be so to *you*, Dr. Fane—you would understand them, they are too deep for me. Dear, dear, it's a great thing to be clever! I've wished I was clever again and again."

"It must be a satisfaction to you to know you need no longer wish it," said Mona, sleepily.

"Eh?" puzzled. "Oh, you mean because of your father! Well, if one has it the other needn't, you know—one does for both. A clever husband doesn't need a clever wife."

"That's a fortunate arrangement," drawled Mona, and added *sotto voce* with shut eyes, "'Let still the woman take an elder than herself; so wears she to him.'"

"But, really, Dr. Fane would be interested," cried Adelaide. "And Mr. Milward would enjoy telling him all about it—he does so delight in imparting information. Mona, hadn't you better take Dr. Fane to your father?"

Mona had risen. "No," she said. "If papa wants a new listener he will come for one." She coloured a little and gave Fane a slightly defiant glance.

"Dr. Fane is no fonder of being bored than other people."

"You do surprise me!" exclaimed Miss Robinson. "Then, Dr. Fane, *I* will take you to Mr. Milward—I *think* you need have no doubt of your welcome if you go with me."

She got up, showing her white teeth in a beaming smile of intended archness, and put her hand firmly upon his arm. Obedience was compulsory, and Fane was led off; while Mona looked after the two a moment and then turned away with an almost audible—"Stupid creature!"

Mr. Milward was chattering in his most voluble style. Evidently, he was already provided with a listener. The back drawing-room was in shadow, except where a circle of light fell on a sheet stretched against the opposite wall. On a table stood a lantern, and at this the lecturer was working.

"Here's Dr. Fane," announced Miss Robinson, in tones that bore down her betrothed's more refined accents.

The dark bending figure raised itself and

nodded a hearty welcome, both hands being at that moment engaged in some critical operation.

"Glad to see you, doctor," cried Mr. Milward, cordially. "You are the very man I should like to talk this matter over with! I've got a new theory!—and if I'm not very much mistaken—"

By this time Fane's eyes had become used to the gloom. On the other side of the table sat a lady leaning her elbow upon it. She looked up now, slowly, and as if with an effort, and Fane started as he saw the face he had seen that morning looking at him out of the gloom.

"As I tell Miss Romney," said Mr. Milward—"you know Miss Romney, of course?" Here Edith bowed, and Fane bent his head in utter confusion of mind. The enthusiastic brewer's attention was engaged by the lantern which had suddenly become refractory, and his remarks were jerky and disconnected. He made a fresh attempt. "I believe I'm on the track of a new discovery!—and if so—if I succeed as I expect—why the professors will get a surprise one day, that's all!—A man should not be content to jog along the time-worn paths of science—he should use his own brains. He should investigate—take nothing on hearsay. Now I've a theory—a theory about the Cheesewring in Cornwall—"

"That's all you care about," broke in his betrothed.

"Now, now—" said Mr. Milward, looking round at her with fond deprecation.

Miss Robinson pouted and flirted her fan with vigour. "You only care for your stupid bits of stones and theories," she declared. "You do, Freddy, you can't deny it. It's abominable treatment! Why, you never took any more notice of me when I brought in Dr. Fane just now than if I'd been the housemaid!"

"Why, my dearest pet!" And in his earnestness to prove how deep was his devotion in spite of this unheard-of neglect, he left the lantern, went to her and took her hands, pouring forth assurances.

For once, Fane felt no inclination to be amused at this artless kind of love-making. Mr. Milward's retreat from the table left him virtually alone with Miss Romney. He had not got over the shock of finding her here—he had had no suspicion of what awaited him when he submitted to Miss Robinson's guidance. The etiquette of society prescribed a civil speech or two on the part of people newly introduced; custom, however, laid no finger of guidance upon Fane now,—he did not think of speaking to her, it seemed to him he must be so painful and disagreeable to



her sight that common courtesy required him to remove himself. There was something especially awkward in this meeting so soon after the Rectory affair—it must be so fresh and bleeding in her mind. His thrusting himself upon her here must make her think he gloried in his brutal triumph.

He had hardly realised the whole unfortunate nature of the position, when Edith turned her head, and raised the eyes that had been lowered during a bitter struggle for self-command. Although no fantastic objections tormented her, this meeting was excessively painful and confusing. She would have done a great deal to avoid it.

“The thaw has set in in earnest, has it not?” she said, a slight vibration in the low clear voice betraying the effort it was to her to speak.

“Yes,” he answered, “the last hour or two have made a decided change. I am sorry for my own part,” he went on, speaking fast in order to spare her as much as possible. “I enjoy hard frosty weather so much; but when the thaw comes it seems as if the enjoyment had been rather too dearly purchased. A week or two’s intolerable slush and mud is a price wholly disproportionate for four or five days’ skating.”

“We have so little skating weather in England.”



“Oh, painfully little! So little that we can’t believe in it when it comes, and so we waste the time expecting a thaw.”

“You like skating?” said Edith, asking the question every girl of his acquaintance had asked him this winter. He heard it from her lips as though he had never heard it before, and indeed, put in her grave voice and accompanied by a glance of polite inquiry from those sad, dark-encircled eyes, it had not the faintest likeness to the many others.

“Very much,” he said.

And here Mr. Milward returned to the lantern, all aglow with lover’s ardour, having pacified his Adelaide, and conducted her to the door on her way to the next room.

“‘Uncertain, coy, and hard to please,’” murmured he, smiling. “Ah yes, they are all the same!—as *you* will know, doctor.”

Fane stared at the man. Then he remembered a fact that explained this mysterious allusion, and a dark flush rose to his brow. He moved hastily and bent down to examine the lantern also.

“It seems to me, Mr. Milward, you can’t manage this concern,” he said, bluntly.

“On the contrary, it has been working well,” cried the brewer. “I understand it perfectly—

Spencer explained the whole principle and mechanism to me. It has only got a temporary hitch. I shall be ready in one moment, Miss Romney. You must see these last photographs—they are the gems of the series. They will enable you to see so much more clearly what I have been explaining. Now then, Dr. Fane, if you would just—ah, thank you. Yes. Now we have it.”

After one or two false starts, and much uncertain movement on the sheet, the photograph was got into place.

“You see, I was right!” said Mr. Milward, in easy triumph. “Patience—perseverance—the old adage, try, try again—King Bruce and the spider. A man who goes in for science must not be deterred by slight difficulties.” He caught up his lecturing rod, and proceeded to point out the details he wished to draw his audience’s attention to; putting his whole soul into his subject, and discoursing with genial, if somewhat stammering and lisping eloquence.

The duties of assistant-exhibitor so hastily put upon Fane kept him standing beside the table. The moment for retreat was certainly past. His ready wit at extricating himself from undesired boredom quite failed him,—indeed, it was with a strange, embarrassed half-pleasure,

half pain, that he remained on the other side of that narrow table, justifying his doing so by the help his host exacted from him. While Mr. Milward flourished his rod and skipped lightly hither and thither before the sheet, he could not easily change the views, and his guest felt grateful to the unconscious enthusiast for providing him with so good a reason for staying in the room.

His consciousness of Edith's proximity never faded for an instant from its keen disturbance. He had only to give a glance from under his lowered lids, as he stooped a little while changing the views, to see the graceful dark head just beyond the lantern, the beautiful profile, and the fine dark line of eyebrow rounding between the forehead and the pale cheek, and the long lashes below. She sat very still, looking listeningly towards her host; now and then one of the words by which a listener shows intelligent interest came from her lips, and Fane caught himself listening in his turn for those courteous syllables.

The last photograph was on the screen when through the curtained doorway came Winifred. She passed in swiftly, the soft trailing of her dress making a slight sound, and paused behind Edith's chair. Mr. Milward happened to be turning over the leaves of a large geological work

in search of a reference, and Winifred seized the opportunity of speaking to her aunt. She bent down and whispered eagerly. Fane could hear every word.

"Aunt Edith, let us go home. Please let us go home."

He could not help observing the two. He saw Edith turn and give a quick, straight look into the girl's agitated face, a glance of comprehensive and tender scrutiny, and then quietly lay her hand upon the one tightly clasping the back of her chair. Then she rose, just as Mr. Milward shut his book with triumphant decision, not having been able to find what he sought.

"Ah, Miss Noel," he exclaimed, "why did you not come sooner? The exhibition is just over. But there is nothing to hinder a second, or even a third—and if you would like—"

"We could not think of being so unreasonable," said Edith. "Do you know how late it is, Mr. Milward?"

"Late? oh nonsense!"

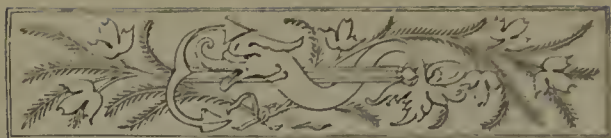
He protested there was no hurry, while Edith smilingly declared they must go. She looked the picture of gracious, protecting womanhood, as she stood calmly holding her point, with Winifred slight, girlish and trembling, clinging to her, hardly able to control her hurry.

"It seems very early," objected Mr. Milward.

"We are early people—and my niece is tired. Good night—thank you so much for showing me these beautiful views." She shook hands, and then passed Fane with a bow, and the next moment had left the room.

The rest of the evening passed like a dream to Fane. He was grateful to Sibyl for leaving rather earlier than usual.





## CHAPTER XI.

### WINIFRED MAKES A REQUEST.

“Till through his want her woe did more increase :  
Then hoping that the change of aire and place  
Would change her pain, and sorrow somewhat ease,  
She parted thence her anguish to appease.”—SPENSER.

IN answer to Edith's inquiries when they reached home, Winifred only said she was very tired, and the heat and talk had made her head ache.

“Whist with Mr. Robinson is exhausting,” she said. “I only want to go to bed.” And she went up-stairs at once.

Sarah had kept up the fire in the dining-room, and Edith, throwing off her fur cloak, sank into a chair beside it. The day had been restless and disturbed, but her fatigue did not suggest the thought of rest and sleep. There was little or no prospect of sleep before her for that night. The terror of trouble that had pursued her all day, came out from the shadowy places into

which she had driven it, and demanded audience, sole and undistracted. She sat in outward apathy—thought, suffering and grief were in too great a tumult to find relief in action or in tears.

She had failed,—over and over again the phrase repeated itself. How was it that seeing the man who had helped to bring about this failure had given her that restriction of the heart?—that despairing sense of the hopelessness of her chances?—that realisation of all that balked her success? He represented to her the prejudices, the hardness, the preferred blindness of the world. His advantages, and they were much greater than the ordinary run of men's, as she had seen with eyes sharpened by pain, crushed her hopes and made her acknowledge the inevitable nature of her defeat. And this was not made easier to her by the fact that, gifted as they both were, had they been man and man, they would have been equal. His attractions were all to his advantage, while hers only added to the weight of the first great drawback—her womanhood. She felt bitterly, cruelly helpless; the injustice was so stern, so all-embracing—her ardent impulses, her knowledge and skill, her talent and devotion, were all denied outlet by the same dead obstruction. She was as hardly imprisoned, as terribly

impotent as a wild bird in a cage. And her first success only intensified the present failure—it seemed too like the mockery of a delusion.

She had sat thus for nearly an hour when the door was softly opened. Edith turned with a start, having forgotten both time and place. The sight of Winifred in long blue dressing-gown, with her fair brown hair all loose upon her shoulders, and her face pale and wan, made her spring up in alarm.

“My dear child, are you ill?” she said, going to the girl and putting a protecting arm round her.

“No, I’m not ill,” said Winifred, leaning her head on Edith’s shoulder and clinging to her almost convulsively. “I thought you had gone to bed, and I went to your room. I want to tell you something—I want to ask you to let me do something. Before to-night I felt I would rather die than breathe a word about it—even to you—but I can’t bear it any longer.”

Edith drew the trembling, agitated girl towards the hearth. “Come and tell me all about it, my poor darling.”

She would have put Winifred into her chair, but the girl slipped to the floor and crouched there, hiding her face. The promised confidence did not come at once. There was a suffering,



appealing, "Oh Aunt Edith!" twice, brought out with a wail, to which Edith could only answer, "Dearest!" in a tone of the softest tenderness. She stroked the drooping head against her knee, and the fond caressing touch soothed Winifred with that sense of protection and care so precious from mother to child. It revived her childish feeling of dependence when she had gone to Edith with all her little troubles and delights as to a mother. It was a moment's exquisite relief to feel this—to know she might throw herself unreservedly upon this motherly heart and sympathy.

"Oh, I am so ashamed!" she said, shuddering, and bowing her head still lower.

"Ashamed?" in loving incredulity.

"Yes. Bitterly ashamed."

And then she poured forth the whole pathetic story of her love, and its daily disappointment and starvation. It was a short and very simple story,—she had loved, believing her love to have been sought, and hardly had she realised the state of her feelings when she found that she had made a mistake, that her love was not desired. That was all; but it was a drawn-out disappointment of five months, and Winifred's endurance had reached its limit.

"I must have deceived myself," she said, in a

very low voice. "He could not have cared for me—it was merely a fancy. But oh! I don't know whether it is worse to think that he believed himself to be in earnest, or that it was only my vanity."

"My dear child," said Edith, "*you* have no cause to be ashamed. That all lies with Oscar Ardley. He certainly did give you cause to believe him in earnest. A very hard name might be applied to his conduct."

She had listened with pain and dismay, anger against Oscar and a great deal of self-remorse, and her voice was indignant.

Winifred said nothing, and Edith's heart went out to her in a warm impulse of pity and remorse.

"Oh, my dear!" she exclaimed. "I wish I had taken better care of you!"

"You, aunt Edith? How could you have helped my folly?"

Edith almost said "I don't know," in her regret and self-accusings. Her heart was torn because her dearest on earth was in trouble. She blamed herself for not watching over Winifred more devotedly. She had been selfish, she told herself—she had thought only of her own trouble, and she could not even comfort herself with the reflection that she had noticed

nothing—she had noticed Winifred's dejection, only in her own sore disappointment it had seemed so natural to see the others in the house look sad. And a sharp terror struck through her like a sword—was this a proof of her mistake? Had she neglected her first duty as woman and guardian? But yet—but yet how could she have helped it? How could she have guarded Winnie's heart for her? Oh, she was growing morbid—horribly morbid! This failure threw its blighting influence over everything.

“Don't torment yourself by calling it folly,” she said. “How could you know—you, who have seen nothing of the vulgarities of flirtation—that Mr. Ardley was not in earnest—was only amusing himself, as the world calls it?”

Winifred shrank—shrank cruelly. She had done her best to tutor herself into this belief, but the words sounded so harsh spoken by another. There had always been the lurking hope even in her most resentful and desponding moods that, did she know all, there would be found some excuse for Oscar's conduct. She could not face the possibility that he had wilfully acted unworthily. And this persistent pleading against the accusation in her own heart, prevented that “breaking of the passion” in her she knew to be so desirable, and tried so conscientiously to

effect. But when Edith, whom she honoured as the truest person she had known or dreamed of knowing, added in clear condemning tones, "He is unworthy, Winnie," she got up on her feet with the quick movement of one suffering some intolerable pain. Her eyes were dilated, her lips moved, some passion struggled for utterance in her working throat,—was it anger against her? wondered Edith. Or was she on the verge of hysterics?

And then it came forth with a wail, "Oh, auntie! and I *loved* him!"

She threw herself on her knees and hid her face in Edith's lap, sobbing.

"Yes, I did!—and it made me so happy—so glad! Oh, I never felt anything like it! I thought love was beautiful and sweet, and it has been hard and bitter! It has made me ashamed every day—ashamed whenever I saw him, although I knew in my heart of hearts that he *had*—oh yes, he did seem once as if he cared—as if he wished—but he never looked at me as he looked at her, never, never! He must have cared for her all the time—he must have been only amusing himself—oh, you are right, you are right! And, auntie, auntie, I thought he *loved* me, and that his love must be for me what mine was for him." A passion of tears choked her voice.

Edith could only murmur a soothing word. Her own tears fell fast. She felt the bitterest anger she had ever known in her life against the man who had wrecked her child's peace for his own selfish amusement—the passing amusement of his idle hours.

“I have tried every day to forget him,” went on Winifred. “I have judged him hardly. I have struggled again and again against my feeling for him. It ought to have changed—oh, it ought, I know, and it *shall*—only it seems so impossible here, where everything reminds me—” the words were breathless and detached. “And to-night, oh, Aunt Edith, I didn't know any one *could* suffer so in seeing a person one loved! How did I bear it? He hung over her when she sang, watching every look. He spoke to me almost as if I were a stranger—no, he seemed ill at ease—that was worse. It seemed as if he remembered, and—and—disliked remembering.” Winifred raised her tear-stained face, and dashed away the tears. “Could I not go home, Aunt Edith?”

Edith started.

“If I went away even for a short time I think I could get over it more quickly. Is it cowardly? But, oh! I have tried a long time, and it gets no easier. But it would be easier

if I were quite away. Papa could have me for a visit."

"Yes," said Edith, breathing quickly—the word was not a permission, merely an acceptance of the suggestion. She looked past the appealing face into the dying fire, and thought quickly with knitted brows. The proposal startled her. Winifred had never been at home. Her father, with a second wife and a family of some half-dozen, had found it easily possible to submit to the loss of his first-born. She had been delivered over to her mother's family freely and unreservedly—no conditions about visits or seeing her had been made. It was a little shock for Winifred to propose leaving her just now. Then she reminded herself that Winifred could not know the true state of her affairs. Edith was not sure whether the fact of this ignorance gave her most relief or most pain. She felt a curious mixture of both. Winifred's unconsciousness removed a little of the pressure she was beginning to feel of expectation regarding her movements. The eyes of her home-world were doubtless upon her; decisions as to her future course had of course been privately made.

"It would be a break," said Winifred, excitedly. "I feel as if I must go away for a time. Being in a strange place and amongst

strangers will help me to win back my peace of mind. You will not mind for a few weeks?"

"Oh no," said Edith, thinking with a gasp how uncertain her future was, and that she had no idea of what might happen during those "few weeks." "I quite understand, dear. It is a very good plan. Change of scene will do you good. If you stay here the worry and fretting will probably make you ill—and as for sparing you, well," she said, forcing a smile, "I must just fancy you are at school, and look forward to your holidays. I will manage it for you. I will write to your father and tell him you are in need of a change, and would like to make acquaintance with your brothers and sisters. And now, Winnie, you must go back to bed and try and get some sleep. Your father will think me a poor guardian, indeed, if I send you to him really ill. It will be all right, dear child. You will feel better when you are away from Wanningster, and time will work wonders, I hope; I know you will be helped as far as possible by pride."

Winnie murmured an assent. "It will be easier away from home," she repeated, a catch in her voice. Edith went up-stairs with her and saw her into bed as if she were a child. After kissing her fondly, she returned to the dining-



room, and wrote the letter to her brother-in-law. Then she wearily mounted the stairs again; but before going to her own room, she paid another visit to Winnie's to see if she was asleep. She stole in without a candle, for it was moonlight. Winnie was fast asleep, breathing softly like a child—a tear resting below each wet eyelash. Edith hung over her with a yearning love and pity in her heart. The thought of parting from her for this visit hurt her more than seemed reasonable. She was almost jealous of Winnie's father. Winnie was her child—she grudged the father even this claim to a visit from her. It was a change—one of the changes that were fast coming to pass—and Edith shrank in nervous fearfulness.

Mr. Noel replied by return of post, giving his daughter a cordial enough invitation, and the day after Winifred went to London.







## CHAPTER XII.

### A GLIMPSE AND A MEETING.

DR. FULLAGHER was an early riser, and he thought little of paying a call at breakfast-time upon his neighbours on the right if there happened to be anything peculiarly gratifying to his saturnine humour in the paper, or if he wished to hear an account of a preceding evening. On the morning after the Milwards' party, therefore, he presented himself just as the Fanes were finishing breakfast, and asked, with even more than his usual interest, how "the affair had gone off." He had enjoyed several amusing descriptions of such affairs from Sibyl and her brother; but that morning Sibyl was sole relater—a fact noted by the doctor.

She gave him generous measure for his entertainment—Mr. Robinson and his daughter, Mr. Milward and his exhibition of views, the Chutterworths and Warrens, afforded abundant material for her lively comments. The doctor

laughed hugely over the geology, uttering an almost affectionate exclamation of "The addle-headed idiot!" but his curiosity was directed towards a fresher subject than the brewer's hobbies.

"You met no more than the usual set, I suppose?" said he.

"Miss Romney!" exclaimed Sibyl. "Positively we have met her at last!"

The doctor restrained one of his favourite ejaculations. "You have?" he said, almost mournfully. "And Fane saw her too, I suppose?"

"Yes, of course he did. The meeting took place in the back drawing-room, so I did not witness it."

"I wish you had done that," he said, and paused. His feelings appeared too deep for words. "Well," he said at length, in a suppressed sort of tone, "you have seen her—you have just seen her. You can give me your opinion. Is there anything so wonderful about her as to have a fatal effect upon a man at the first glance?"

"Who has been fatally affected?"

"I am not at liberty to reveal that," said Fulagher. "Just answer my question, Miss Sibyl."

"Ah," she said laughing, "you scoffed before

when I promised to show you her photograph. You should see her, herself."

"Good Lord!" cried the doctor, "am I never to get a straightforward answer! I thought I might always depend upon *you* for that, Miss Sibyl! What is there about the woman to cause this universal madness?"

"I am only surprised the madness is not universal," said Sibyl. "Oh, she has a lovely face, hasn't she, Austin?"

Fane folded the newspaper with a rustle, and thus escaped answering—a manœuvre which did not elude the doctor's keen eye.

"Lovely," snarled he contemptuously. "The word is used a thousand times too cheaply."

"Well, beautiful—perfectly beautiful," exclaimed Sibyl, delighted at rousing him.

The doctor sprang from his chair and seized his hat. "Well, if this sort of thing is to go on I think I shall travel," he said. "I've no fancy for living next door to a private lunatic asylum."

"Wait a moment," said Sibyl, hurrying to the door. "I have her photograph somewhere—I will show it to you."

"No, don't trouble. I hate photographs—they always flatter. Don't trouble!" he cried hastily, but she had gone.

"I suppose," said Fullagher, with his coldest

sneer to Fane—"I suppose you will call at 20, Princess Road this morning, and offer to give back her practice—*her* practice? no, damn it all, mine! It would be a beautiful deed of chivalry, Don Quixote."

"Too beautiful I fear to be practical," said Fane. Dr. Fullagher looked at him. "Then you haven't slept it off?"

"Oh, you may sneer," retorted Fane, taking a savage pleasure in vexing him. "As for sleeping it off, I don't think I shall ever forgive myself—or you, either—for having ruined that lady's chances here."

The doctor flushed angrily. "The devil!" he cried furiously, and striding to the door shut it with some force behind him, and left the house, quite forgetful of Sibyl.

Fane threw back his head and laughed aloud. Meeting Sibyl in the hall on his way to the consulting-room, he said—"The doctor could not wait any longer. He'll be back this evening in an abject frame of mind."

"I can't find that photograph—and I should like to convince the old sceptic."

"That, my dear, is a task beyond human powers. As for finding any of your possessions, it is a wonder to me you ever can do so," said Fane, serenely.

One or two patients were waiting. He despatched them with more than his usual business-like rapidity, and then turned his attention to the answering of his morning's correspondence. When he found, however, that the address and date and "Dear Sir" only were written at the end of about fifteen minutes, he gave up the attempt for the present and took to walking up and down the room.

Why had she looked so sad? The intense mournfulness of her face and air startled him even in recollection. For his own part, he did not regard the loss of a practice as a matter for deep sorrow. Had the Wannisterians tired of him he would have taken their defection philosophically enough. Miss Romney's expression reminded him of a friend who had failed, and died of a broken heart. Fane did not like this likeness at all. It was evident that her defeat in this town was bitterer than ordinary defeats in earning a living—it meant more to her than a mere "not getting on" in one place. And now that he had seen her, he was keen-sighted enough to perceive that her choice of a profession had not been the careless matter it had been to himself—she was not the woman to take to it for mere distinction's sake, or through antagonism to his sex, but only because she had felt a true and

earnest conviction of her vocation for it. He was sure of this. It might be, too, that she depended upon it solely ; if so, it was terrible to think how far-reaching the ruin was, in what straits of poverty it would place her. She might be even now in difficulties—he quickened his pace at the thought.

One thing seemed clear—she would of course leave Wanningster. The place must be hateful to her. Most probably he would not even see her again. Hitherto, he had not found it difficult to meet the objects of his easy, fleeting admiration ; his serious courtship had been the most delightful of calm sailing ; but for once he tasted the wholesome discipline of his own powerlessness against the force of circumstance. Edith was guarded against his approach by the barriers cast around her by his own prejudices, his own successes, and her great sorrow. The thought of his own engagement did not enter his head as a further obstacle—his feelings were not yet defined or self-conscious enough ; perhaps he had not yet learned the reason of his torturing remorse and fierce longing for a glimpse of her face, his eager restlessness and confusion of spirit—and Violet could never come into comparison with Edith.

Still, when Sibyl put her head out of the

drawing-room door as he was preparing to start for his rounds, and remarked, "I suppose you will be seeing Violet this morning?" the name and the suggested duty were undeniably a shock.

"Tell her to expect me this afternoon for a good practising," added Sibyl. "And—oh, say that Bertie *must* be more industrious! We can't have that trio spoilt."

"I will try and remember," said her brother; and he drove off amazed and horrified at the unreality and unprofitableness of the whole affair—the visit to the Hall, seeing Violet, and the amateur concert for which all this practising was the needful preparation. Yesterday, only yesterday, had put that group of interests far back into some dreamy past. For the first time his almost daily visit to the Hall appeared only in the light of a duty, and irksome as a duty without pleasure.

The morning's work dragged. He hated his patients with a frank hatred. They all missed their pleasant doctor. It was as well they could not know how painful an effort it was to him to be even commonly civil—that the man to whom they had gone so easily regarded them with a bitter scorn, and burned to avenge the despised Miss Romney.

Violet received him with her gentle, happy

smile. He could hardly smile in answer. The picture of a sad face looked out reproachfully even from Violet's loving blue eyes. He did not stay many minutes. She wished him to hear a new song which she thought would be suitable for the concert, but Fane pleaded a heavy round.

"I am rejoiced to hear it," observed Mrs. Lorimer, looking up from her accounts. "I felt sure you ought to get a capital practice. Mrs. Egerton was talking about you yesterday, and asking a great many questions; so, in time, my dear Austin, I have no doubt she may employ you. Of course you have gained all the best town families now?"

"I think so," he said slowly. He was standing near the window, and he looked out down the drive, and thought with a fierce pain and anger of a certain tall, noble woman's figure that used to come and go a few months before.

"Yes," said Mrs. Lorimer, with satisfaction. "And the Rectory,—I heard this morning that Mr. Stanforth has given up his ridiculous whim at last."

"News travel very quickly here," said Fane, with a curl of the lip rather alarming to Violet, who, for the first time, had the pleasure of seeing a stern bitterness on his face.

"The butcher brought the intelligence," said



Mrs. Lorimer. "Really, it was not before time. People were talking a great deal about the Rector and Miss Romney."

"I heard something of that absurd chatter," said Fane, quickly.

"Yes; it was indeed absurd," said Mrs. Lorimer, placidly. "The Rector is the last man to make a *mésalliance*—his family is irreproachable. And as for his poor dear wife—well, her uncle is a baronet. So there was no danger. Of course, now, Miss Romney will leave the town. Have you heard anything about her intended movements?"

"Nothing—not a word. There is surely not much inducement for her to stay, is there?" he said, with a short laugh—a laugh which Mrs. Lorimer understood perfectly as a sneer against the lady-doctor, and which accordingly brought a cordial smile to her own lips. All at once she checked the smile, sighed mournfully, and shook her head.

"We have bad news from my poor sister—the invalid at Nice, you remember," she said, gravely. "She is growing steadily worse, they fear. I intend to give up my season in London to go and nurse her. I would go at once—indeed I am all anxiety and impatience to be there, but I must wait till after the concert. It

would stop it altogether if I went before, and when I once take a thing in hand I always carry it through to the end. Always."

Fane murmured something inarticulate as she paused there. Then he remembered that more might very naturally be expected from him, and said with almost a jerk, "Do you go alone?"

"No. I could not leave Violet here by herself. She and Bertie both accompany me. You will have a personal reason for sharing our anxiety," she added, with a smile.

The smile chilled him. He regarded her with a puzzled look.

"You will have to control your impatience, my dear Austin," said Mrs. Lorimer, with the same attempt at solemn archness. "Be assured. I feel for your disappointment even in the midst of my own overmastering anxiety. I try and hope for the best, but, unless a favourable change in my dear sister's condition occurs soon, I fear, I sadly fear, your happiness may be postponed for some months longer."

Violet's blushing face made the plain meaning of these words still plainer.

"I—I hope Miss—Miss—"

"Morton," supplied Mrs. Lorimer.

"I hope Miss Morton will recover," he managed to say. Then he hastily departed, forgetting his

parting salute to Violet, and leaving her puzzled and distressed at his strange manner.

“Poor fellow, it was quite a blow,” remarked Mrs. Lorimer. “But I thought it better to prepare him for the worst.”

While Fane strode down the drive, goaded by an intolerable sense of being bound and fettered. He was not free, he suddenly realised—he was Mrs. Lorimer’s property! He remembered sundry hints dropped by her which pointed clearly to a determination on her part to have no prolonged engagement. He had been in no hurry to marry; still he had not cared much either way—had a certain something *not* happened yesterday, in all probability he would have given in very easily to Mrs. Lorimer’s plans; now he felt chiefly that he had received a respite—an escape from a hidden danger—an extension of his time of partial freedom. And with intense relief he remembered that Mrs. Lorimer was going away.

Three days later Fane saw Miss Romney. He had gone to the station to inquire about a box of drugs he was expecting from London, and, having done his errand, he was standing by the book-stall, turning over the papers, when, glancing up, his eye fell upon her. She had just parted from Winifred, and was walking from the south

platform towards the entrance. She would have to pass the book-stall. The paper in Fane's hand rustled. He put it down only to take it up again. She was coming nearer. Her eyes were looking straight ahead. He did not know whether to be glad or sorry not to be seen by her; his heart was beating too heavily and too nervously for him to be conscious of anything except her approaching figure. Just as she reached the end of the stall a porter pushed by with a load of luggage. Edith drew aside to make way, almost touching Fane as she saved herself from being run over. The porter passed, and as she was going on she glanced at the gentleman near. Their eyes met. She bowed slightly, he raised his hat, and in a few steps more she had disappeared. Fane waited a few minutes before leaving the station. He had had a chance of speaking to her, but it was a chance he could not possibly have taken advantage of. He walked out presently, making his way almost roughly through the hurrying crowd, pale to the lips, and with a pain at his heart utterly unknown to him before.

He was bitterly restless those first days. Suffering was new and bewildering to him. He was tied down to his work, and to the duties and little services of the engaged lover, and there

was no eluding the claims of either. Everything was irksome. He could not throw up his practice and rush away—the delights of freedom were his no longer. Nor would he, even if he could, have left Wanningster just then. Was Edith not in it still? He chafed against everything—work, his engagement, friendship—everything but this new overwhelming feeling; to that he surrendered himself without a struggle.

The slightest mention of her name made his heart beat, and made him listen eagerly for any word about her. He never expected to see her, yet he was unnerved, thrilled and agitated by the constant hope of catching a glimpse of the beautiful face and figure. Not once, but nearly every day he had to hear guesses and wonderings as to her movements. Where would she go? his patients kindly speculated. Would she give up practising, or would she try in another town? How lonely she must be without her niece. It was strange Miss Noel should leave her at such a time. They heard that the coachman had received warning at last—it was rather extravagant to have kept him on so long when there was positively no need for a horse and carriage, her practice having dwindled so. “Miss Romney passed the other day walking. She looks terribly altered. It is evident she feels it very much,”

with easy pity. "I wonder she does not leave the town at once," and a great deal more of the kind.

Fane left these houses feeling as if he had been racked. His own heart ached for her loneliness; he was tortured by thoughts of her leaving the town. Her staying could do no good, but then—how was he to endure the idea of her going quite away? Every time a talkative matron opened her lips with Miss Romney's name, a cold fear that it was to announce her departure took possession of him.

One afternoon, a week after his visit to the station, in passing the corner house of Princess Road, he happened to glance at the bay-window, and caught a glimpse of a seated figure within. It was a very indistinct glimpse, but some graceful line about the dark, shadowy figure suggested Edith to him. He slackened his steps and walked very slowly, his eyes bent on the ground, and a struggle going on within. It might be only fancy—most probably was only fancy, seeing that he was constantly thinking of her—but yet he longed so to see her!—no trouble was too great that might make the fancy real. Should he turn back and call? He did owe a call most certainly—he had put it off for an unpardonable length of time; and then he checked

himself as he was about to turn. He had no right to put himself in her way; every feeling of honour and delicacy bade him keep out of her sight.

A cheery voice drew up his downcast face. The Milwards, father and son, stood directly in his path on their return from business.

"Well met, doctor!" cried the brewer, in his kindly fashion. "You are never passing the very house, surely? Turn back with us—my daughter shall give you a cup of tea. There's nothing like tea after a walk on a winter's afternoon. And I have ——'s new book of poems to show you. There is one I particularly wish you to hear; I will read it after tea. Reginald, here, declares it to be the finest thing he has read for some time—the most original modern poem I think you said, Regie—and, as a critic, his opinion is worth a great deal."

Fane had mechanically allowed himself to be turned. His one anxiety now was to reach Mr. Milward's house before that figure had departed. He could have quickened the movements of the two men—Reginald, who, with beardless face up-tilted in the wintry air, was slowly explaining the merits of the poem which had won approval from his fastidious taste, and Mr. Milward, who listened with respect to his son's remarks, smiling



fondly on him the while. Fane heard nothing of the criticisms ; and, by the time the house was reached, and they stood in the hall taking off their ulsters, he had forgotten even the title of the poem. What he thought was that, even suppose she took flight on hearing voices, he would be able to see her. He had quite made up his mind that the figure belonged to Miss Romney ; and when they entered the drawing-room, which was all a-glow with the warm light of a blazing fire, and his eye fell at once on a tall, graceful lady standing at the foot of Mona's couch, he felt simply that her presence there was the realisation of a confident expectation.

The entrance of the three men made a great difference in the dreamy room, full of twilight shadows and ruddy fire-glow. Mona, who was lying on the couch in slight feverish indisposition, raised herself, and gave Fane a limp, hot hand to touch, and then leaned languidly back again ; while her father briskly rang the bell for tea, and Reginald with equal briskness lit the gas, and drew down the blinds. Edith and Fane exchanged bows, and then Mona pulled down her friend to sit beside her.

Miss Milward was evidently not in a good humour. She grumbled at her brother for lighting the gas, remarked ungraciously that they



were earlier than usual, and declared there was nothing for tea but bread and butter. "And you must be content to eat it at least three quarters of an inch thick, Dr. Fane," she drawled, "because our cook only understands the kind used in orphan asylums."

Mr. Milward laughed, as he always did at his daughter's "sauciness."

"Ah," he said, excusingly, as he fondly stroked the rumpled hair, "my little girl is out of sorts to-day. I must thank you for coming to cheer her up, Miss Romney. I fear we have interrupted your cosy confidences over the fire."

"This is papa's way of drawing general attention to the fact that his 'little girl' is cross," said Mona.

"Music," observed her father, meditatively—"they say music has soothing charms; surely the cultivation of friendship should be still more powerful to induce serenity of mood?"

"Well!" cried Mona, "for a delicate insinuation! If my friends *do* shun me after this, under the supposition that I behave myself as a rule more like a wild animal than a human being, I shall know how to understand it. I shall expect now that no one will venture to call unless under the escort of an accomplished musician, who can preside at the piano

or the bag-pipes during the interchange of civilities."

"Chutterworth should be warned to make the most of his flute-practising while he has the chance," remarked Reginald, condescending to smile.

Neither of the two guests paid much heed to this chatter. Each was too conscious of the other's presence. Fane's entrance had been somewhat of a shock to Edith. She had not seen him pass—his voice in the hall was the first thing to warn her, and seeing him again so soon almost startled her. They had never met before; it seemed strange they should meet so often now. Mr. Milward's appearance delayed her departure. She could not hurry away directly. Had her attention been free she might have felt some surprise at finding Austin Fane so different to her preconceived idea of him. From what she had heard, she expected to see a man of polished manners, certainly, but of a freer, more dashing style—one who would talk brilliantly, and be the chief person in the room, with the elation and self-consequence of the prosperous and flattered man. Whereas, he was quiet and grave. Success never sat more gracefully upon any one;—he looked rather depressed than elated. But Edith hardly thought this out

—the ordeal of his presence at all was too great to allow her any scrutiny. She sat with her head turned to Mona, and smiled faintly at her nonsense, only too well aware of the dark figure opposite, of every slight movement, and every word.

Fane's words, indeed, were almost as few as her own. Happily, the Milwards were a host in themselves as far as talking went. He shaded his eyes from the fire, and, thus screened, allowed himself the indulgence of quick, shy glances at the graceful lady on the couch.

The tea was brought, and Reginald undertook the office of pourer-out. He addressed himself to the task with the earnestness he carried to a scientific experiment ; indeed, he believed earnestness to be as much needed in tea-making as in science, for he at once informed Fane, who had advanced to give his help with the cups, that he had a theory about it.

“ I mean about the mere pouring out,” he said. “ I don't approve of the cup being filled with tea first, and the sugar and cream added after ; you lose the thickness and richness of the mixture then. Miss Romney, you take cream and sugar, I believe ? ”

Miss Romney assented ; and, with much careful proportioning, a cup was prepared for her.

“If you don’t hit exactly the right quantity of sugar and cream at first, you never do,” said Reginald, delivering the cup to Fane, with the anxious care a work of art receives from the hands of the enthusiastic artist. “*I hope* that is right.”

Fane, in another way, felt the responsibility of the precious compound entrusted to him. His hand, in fact, was hardly steady. It was a gratification to him to do this little service for Edith. He approached her—she was speaking to Mr. Milward, and for the moment was unaware of his approach. Scarcely more than an instant—then she turned quickly, took the cup, and said, “Thank you,” with a glance up at him.

“Is the bread and butter eatable?” asked Mona, with a show of languid interest.

“Cutting bread and butter is an art,” Reginald pronounced in his distinct, didactic tones, “and, like all arts, needs careful practice to bring it to perfection.”

“If you get so knowing on domestic matters, Reginald, you will be as valuable a working housekeeper as Mr. Stanforth himself,” said his sister. “Have you heard the latest about him, Miss Romney? They say he attends the cookery

classes, and then gives his cook the benefit of what he has heard and seen—a sort of private demonstration class, you know.”

“A simpler plan would be to send the cook,” said Reginald.

“Simpler, yes—but not so satisfactory to the Rector’s conscientious mind,” said Mona.

“By-the-by,” said Fane suddenly to Mr. Milward, “what do you think of that last letter of Johnson’s in the ‘Advertiser?’”

Mr. Milward had of course a very careful opinion on the subject of the whole correspondence which was just then raging in the paper between the two lawyers, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Warren, and Fane found occupation in an appearance of attentive interest. In reality, he heard most of the other talk.

Reginald alluded to Winifred’s departure, asking if it were true she would be away some weeks; and, on being assured it was, expressed, in stilted phraseology, his regrets for Miss Romney’s loneliness. While Mona grumbled at losing her bridesmaid—the prettiest, too, as she frankly averred.

“I looked to her to supply the good looks in the procession,” she said, reproachfully. “As it is, I shall now have only the gratification of

knowing that my wedding will be spoken of with rapturous enthusiasm as being unique in variety of plainness."

"Ethel Warren is a pretty girl," observed her brother.

"Yes, very pretty," added Edith.

"But think of Winifred! No, I shall never forgive her if she does not come back in time for my execution."

"I don't think it is very likely," said Edith, rising to go.

Mona held her hand and clung to her like a spoilt child. "Come again to-morrow," she half-whispered.

Edith promised, and took her leave of the others. Mr. Milward rushed to open the door, and to take her to the gate, offering cordially to "see her home," though it was only twilight. Fane, who had been taken leave of by a slight bow, remained standing thoughtfully looking down into the fire.

Mona's lisping voice, addressing him in mocking tones of sympathy, made him turn towards her. She was leaning a little forward, regarding him with angry, shining eyes, and a malicious smile.

"How relieved you must feel, Dr. Fane!" And then, as he looked inquiringly, "Don't you

remember your denunciation of lady-doctors? You must have suffered acutely the last twenty minutes! I have not forgotten what you said, and I should think Miss Romney herself is not likely to forget."

Fane's face darkened. "What do you mean?" he said.

"Only that I told her what you said—I knew she was not likely to be crushed by a man's disapprobation. I told her some time ago, and, you see, she still lives."

"I did not know Miss Romney," said Fane, speaking with cold hauteur. "My remarks merely referred to lady-doctors as a class."

"Oh yes, I know. Of course, as she belongs to that class, she could not feel at all affected." Mona laughed with the glee of a mischievous child. She had only made her attack to relieve the bitterness of her anger against Fane; she had had no hope of anything she might say disturbing him. "Well, I suppose you don't bear malice *now*," she added. "You will be most unreasonable if you do. I am sure she has atoned amply for her presumption—even *you* must feel that your sex's privileges have been guarded and safely restored in all their completeness."

Reginald was searching for the volumes of

poems his father had mentioned, and heard nothing of this. Before Fane could reply, Mr. Milward returned.

"Well," said he, coming to the fire, and cheerfully rubbing his hands, "I suppose the next thing we shall hear of will be Miss Romney's own departure. Did she tell you anything of her plans, my love?"

"Not a word," said Mona sharply, dragging herself up from the couch. "When one has just received the usual rending in return for pearls, one needs a little time to gather one's self together, I should think."

And, having flung this general taunt with a quaking in her voice, Mona left the room.

"She is not well," said her father, in tender deprecation. "Miss Romney has certainly won a most devoted affection from my little girl. I never knew anyone else exert such a marvellous influence over my Mona."

And, hearing this, Fane forgave Mona for her tormenting. He wished he could go, too, but there was no escape until the poem had been read by Mr. Milward, and discussed exhaustively by father and son, who both appeared to share Humpty Dumpty's confidence of an ability to "explain all the poems that ever were invented."





## CHAPTER XIII.

### SIBYL'S CONSCIENCE.

“ From yon, Ianthe, little troubles pass  
Like little ripples down a sunny river ;  
Your pleasures spring like daisies in the grass,  
Cut down and up again as blithe as ever.”

LANDOR.

WHILE Austin was suffering poetical persecution at the hands of the Milwards, Sibyl was lying back in a deep lounging-chair at home, languidly replying to the remarks made by Dr. Fullagher, who stood in front of her, with his back to the fire. The gas was not yet lighted, and the room was full of oddly-shaped and moving shadows—that shadow cast by the doctor's large form being huge enough to throw greater part of the ceiling and of the opposite wall into shade. But the flickering firelight played brightly over Sibyl in her roomy chair drawn near the hearth, and it was upon her face that Fullagher's eyes were chiefly fixed, decided

perplexity in their gaze. She had been quiet, almost out of spirits, for the last few days—this afternoon he had come in to find her “moping” in the twilight. The doctor’s disgust was equalled by his curiosity; he was anxious to find out the reason of the phenomenon.

“Can’t you throw it off?” he urged, persuasively.

Sibyl shook her head—her low spirits did not prevent her taking a perverse pleasure in disturbing her old friend.

He glanced at the gipsy-table, with its afternoon tea-service.

“Ah—callers. May I ask who they were?”

“The Warren girls and Mrs. West.”

“A heavy dose,” commented the doctor, “but it hardly accounts for the gravity of your symptoms. I have known you victimised by treble the amount of imbecile foolishness, and be livelier at the end than at the beginning.” He paused, eyeing her sideways. “Has your dress-maker been disappointing you?”

“No. She sent home a dress last night.”

“Try it on,” he said cheerfully.

“I have tried it on.”

“What is the colour?”

Sibyl mentioned some remarkable French term.

“I’m as wise as ever,” said Fullagher. “Per-

haps it doesn't suit you—a colour with such a name must need a peculiar complexion.”

“It does suit me,” she said, almost with animation. “It is a lovely colour.”

“Perhaps not quite—not quite the fashion, eh?” he suggested, still on the quest for some cause of dissatisfaction.

“It is the very newest fashion!” indignantly.

“Then it will delight you.” He paused, evidently at a loss, and then was struck by a fresh idea.

“Ah! the dress doesn't fit.”

“It fits beautifully,” said Sibyl.

“Sleeves? and flounces? and everything?” with an air of intelligent interest.

“Everything—especially the flounces.”

“Then it isn't the dress,” mused the doctor.

“No; it isn't the dress.”

A short pause while the doctor applied to his beard for inspiration, and watched Sibyl out of the corner of his eye.

“You have not been like yourself for the last day or two,” he grumbled.

She sighed softly. “I have felt like this for a week.”

“A week? What happened a week ago?” tilting his head back, and looking at the ceiling as he searched his memory.

"Oh, nothing," she said, a faint colour rising to her cheek. "My discomfort comes from myself. I am afraid I have made a discovery."

"If it's interesting let me hear it."

"A very serious discovery," added Sibyl.

"If it is anything really serious, pray don't trouble to tell me," said P'ullagher, making a hasty move.

"It is *very* serious."

"Then I'll go."

"Ah, you are only a fair-weather friend after all!"

"I never made myself out to be any better than my neighbours," he said, rather crossly.

Sibyl leaned forward, and raised her fair, charming face in the firelight. "You ought really to pity me, doctor dear."

"Pity you?" uneasily.

"Yes. I am so terribly afraid I have a conscience."

The doctor burst into a laugh. "Is that all? Then you may put the idea out of your head at once. Never be driven by a delusion. Women haven't consciences, you know."

"You have sometimes said I was not exactly the same as every other woman."

"I believe I have," said the doctor, in a tone suggestive of regret for too hasty an assertion.

"But I reserved to myself the right of choosing the points of non-resemblance, you know."

"I don't think *you* have a conscience."

"One isn't obliged to carry all one's possessions about with one."

"I fear, doctor, you would fail as a father-confessor—in spite of the splendid proof you have just shown of your power of sympathising with the troubles of the feminine mind."

"Don't be ungrateful, young lady. Like all women ["Oh dear!" groaned Sibyl], you are shirking the question in hand. I don't know whether your conscience or your heart is disturbing you, but there is one point on which I should like to have my mind set at rest—are you going to turn out on my hands like your brother?" severely.

"Austin? Why, what has he done?"

"Done?—he's a changed creature—and all the result of engaging himself to a woman!"

"I will certainly promise not to do that."

"He is not worth his salt as a companion," said Dr. Fullagher, in wrathful disgust. "I daren't ask him to dinner."

"Ah, I think after all your plan of having the men and women to live separately would be the best," said Sibyl, feelingly.

The doctor received this profession of a

conversion to his views somewhat unsympathetically. He laughed until the tears stood in his eyes. "You of all women!" he gasped.

"I really mean it," said Sibyl, frowning.

"Of course you do. I don't doubt your earnestness for a moment," he said, with another outburst. "Men are the greatest plague of your life, I know."

"Yes. I dislike them often."

"Of course, of course. You find it so difficult to get on with them."

Sibyl made no reply to this sarcasm.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" said Fullagher, in a business-like tone; "anything to alleviate this unnatural and extreme despair? If young Ardley has neglected to call for—a week," wickedly, "I will call him out with pleasure. I will drag him here by force, or shoot him on the race-course."

"He called yesterday," said Sibyl, indifferently.

"Well," said Dr. Fullagher, "your case beats me, I confess. A second opinion seems wanted, and as I have a professional objection to a second opinion, I will take myself off. When the sun shines here again, just send word in next door, and I'll come and look at the unwanted spectacle."

Sibyl jumped up, and held him laughingly with her hands on his arms.

"Don't be cross," she said, coaxingly. "There is always plenty of sunshine here."

"There *was*, but I seem to have fallen into an unlucky habit of coming in when it is hidden by clouds," he said, whimsically.

"Oh no! surely not so bad as that! This time you have scattered the clouds—you are worth a dozen father-confessors!"

"It's no doubt a handsome compliment, but, as I never considered the confessor an admirable character, I fail to see the advantage of intensifying him by such reckless multiplication. Let me see, they had an important duty."

"What was it?"

"They inflicted penances, didn't they?"

Sibyl nodded.

He looked at her thoughtfully. "I've a great mind to use a twelfth share of the privileges in that way with which you have so generously endowed me."

"If you are so merciful you shall. What is my penance to be?"

"I am bashful. The weight of my new and unexpected responsibility oppresses me. Encourage me."

"I encourage you," she said, smiling.

"Do you? May I?" looking down at the bewitching face, which was as bright as he loved

to see it. He bent his head, and softly kissed her cheek. "I'm old enough," he said, half apologetically. "Now, keep the blues away; you are too bright and bonny a creature to be troubled by vapours. You haven't a conscience, you know. You have only to be happy, like the butterflies."

"A delightful doctrine! But even the butterflies have rainy days. However, I think I do manage to live up to it pretty well, on the whole."

"You can't do better. Good-bye," and the doctor departed.

"I wish I hadn't a conscience," thought Sibyl, as she stood looking thoughtfully down into the fire. "Or rather, I wish I had not this disagreeable fear of having done something to deserve a prick from it."

A week ago she had heard of Winifred's departure, and for some reason the news had made her uneasy. Mona Milward had told her, and Mona's manner had been peculiar. She had mentioned the fact in a resentful sort of fashion, as if she owed Sibyl a grudge for her friend's going away. There was no mistaking Mona's meaning, unreasonable as it first appeared, and Sibyl had been slightly startled, for a very small amount of reflection made the unreasonableness



dwindle to absurdly microscopic proportions. It was not pleasant to think that her amusement had hurt another girl. Men's attentions were so much an everyday affair to her that, when she came to Wanninger, and found Oscar ready to still offer his, she accepted them as a matter of course. He was the best bred and most agreeable man she met in the place, and it was the most natural thing in the world that he should devote himself to her. There had been in her mind no thought of robbing another. She was here only for a visit, and when she went he would return to his serious love-making.

Mona's news startled her to a perception of the flight of time: five months had passed, and she was sadly afraid that irreparable harm was done. Oscar Ardley might have had nothing to do with Winifred's going away, it is true, but this possibility gave Sibyl no comfort. She could not stifle a suspicion that she was not quite guiltless in the matter. She had neither wished nor intended mischief, but the most lenient judgment must condemn her conduct as culpably thoughtless. She ought to have discouraged Oscar; and it was a little mortifying to know she had failed in a duty that would have cost her no effort. She did not care anything for his attentions; their loss would have caused

her no regret. Her opinion of the depth and constancy of men's feelings was unflatteringly low; many men had made love to her, and yet she had not credited them with a quarter of the passion they professed; and this scepticism made her rather careless of her favours to them. Oscar, on his own account, had no share in her anxiety; it was all given to Winifred.

“Had I anything to do with sending her away?” she thought, as she stood by the fire, asking again the question that had tormented her the last seven days. “If a man knows his mind no better than he appears to have done, what good would snubbing him do? Why won't men be reasonable? Why don't they amuse themselves only as I do? It is so senseless that we cannot know each other, and take pleasure in each other's society, without so much fuss and unhappiness. I don't want their love—I don't want their tragedy—both are wearisome—I only like them in comedy; when they are in earnest about anything they infallibly bore. And yet. Dr. Fullagher laughs when I say so, and Mona Milward evidently believes me to be that dreadful creature—a coquette.—*He* would think me a coquette, too, I suppose—of course he did, he said as much. How can I help it if men will be so foolish?—But I wish that poor child had

not gone away. I wish it could be put right. I have a conscience really, doctor."

The striking of a clock roused her, she hastily looked at her watch.

"Half-past five! I shall be late! Violet will almost have given me up."

She left the room at once, and ran up-stairs to dress. The inopportune visitation from Mrs. West and the Misses Warren, followed by the doctor's call, had prevented her keeping an engagement to spend the afternoon with Violet—an afternoon that was to have been devoted to ardent practising. There was to be an amateur concert in the old town-hall, in aid of two or three destitute families, whose homes had been destroyed by the overflowing of the river a few weeks ago. Sibyl had suggested the idea, and Mrs. Lorimer had taken it up as her own; and, on that supposition, had proceeded to carry it out as energetically and thoroughly as she carried out all her undertakings. Charitable enterprises of this kind were her delight. She graciously consented to give her name as lady-patroness, and most willingly allowed Violet and Bertie to take part in the performance—there was a graceful propriety in their doing so; their names would go far to attract an audience, and to ensure success. Mrs. Lorimer intended, also,

to make the concert an opportunity for bringing forward two young people in whom she took a great interest at that time. These were a Mr. and Miss Barlowe, who had lately come to live in Bycroft. Mr. Barlowe was the new organist of the village church, and his sister led the choir; each was gifted with a fine voice; and Mrs. Lorimer had taken them up in the assured conviction that she had discovered two geniuses, who only needed some encouragement and a few opportunities to enable them to make a stir in the musical world. She had appointed Mr. Barlowe to be conductor and concert-manager, and his help and advice were of great service to the amateurs. Of these there was no lack; indeed, so many had offered their services, that the difficulty had been to keep the number of performers within moderate limits—the apparently simple task of selection having been rendered by social considerations a work both delicate and complicated. The inexpediency of giving offence to any made a terrible fetter: while the desire of bestowing honour where honour was due was not in many cases as easy of fulfilment as it might have been, owing to a perverse hostility between musical talent and money. Careful management, however, and a judicious use of part songs for the energies

of surplus talent, averted the threatened danger of the programme's being a mere list of performers. Several withdrew their offers on finding that work was really exacted from them, and that some difficulty in satisfying Mr. Barlowe's unreasonable requirements was the trying substitute for deserved compliments. Timely colds released them from their promises, or they remembered that they had always disapproved of the mingling of charity with amusement. Both Mrs. Lorimer and Mr. Barlowe appreciated the mercifulness of an arrangement which included the poorest singers amongst these deserters.

Austin was just entering the house as his sister ran down-stairs in evening dress.

"There's a cab at the door—are you going anywhere?" he asked.

"The Hall. Have you forgotten? Remember dinner is at eight, and that you will be anxiously expected. I promised to go early. You must follow."

"I can't dine out this evening—I have too much work to do," he said, almost irritably. "I will come for you after dinner."

"That must do, I suppose," said Sibyl, regretfully. "Violet will be disappointed, but it can't be helped."

"If you are ready I will put you in the cab," was all Fane answered.

Sibyl had time to go over the same round of self-accusing and regretful thoughts during her dark, solitary drive, and by the time she reached the Hall she was as low-spirited as she had been before the doctor put forth his efforts to cheer her. For once her bright and ready interest failed her. The concert was a bore, practising was becoming wearisome, and she almost dreaded meeting Oscar, who was to dine at the Hall this evening. For the last few days a rueful conviction that he would give her more trouble had been gaining upon her. His manner had been strange since Winifred went to London; and the fact that Winifred's movements affected him so oddly did not soothe Sibyl's own uneasiness. She had behaved coldly to him, and there had come a defiant, almost fierce, expression into his eyes, which told her that he refused her right to treat him distantly, and in short, warned her that his mood was rapidly becoming dangerous.

Violet received her with gentle reproaches for her lateness, and Sibyl explained about her callers.

"Is Austin coming?" asked Violet, making an effort to speak easily and naturally. "I am

sorry," she said, quietly, on hearing he was not.

"It is a good thing he is so busy," said Sibyl, cheerfully.

"Yes, I suppose it is." But the tone was dejected, and her eyes were sad as she looked dreamily into the fire. "They are late from hunting," she said, rousing herself after a few moments.

"Who are 'they'?" inquired Sibyl, lazily. "Is anyone with your brother?"

"He has a friend staying with him—a Mr. Lester from London."

There was a slight rustle of Sibyl's silken folds. "Who?"

"Mr. Lester. Do you know him? He is a barrister, of very good family, mamma says—a quiet, plain, clever man."

"I believe I do," said Sibyl, slowly. "At least, I do know a Mr. Lester."

"I wonder if he is the same."

"Let me see—'quiet, plain, and clever,' you said?" And after a moment's thought Sibyl added, with careful deliberation, "Yes, he certainly answers that description."

"The Christian name would tell you, perhaps. Bertie's friend's name is Hugo—such a pretty name, I think."

"Very pretty," assented Sibyl. "It is the name of the Mr. Lester I know."

"It will be pleasant for you if he is an old friend," observed Violet.

"Perhaps," said Sibyl, with the lowest of little laughs.

Violet proceeded to tell her that he was a friend of the Egertons, and had been staying with them; that Bertie had met him in the hunting-field, and had asked him to come to the Hall when his time was up at the Egertons.

Sibyl listened demurely, playing with her fan, upon which her eyes were fixed; there was a faint air of excitement about her, and a lovely rose-flush on her bent face. Conscience and its pangs was not holding the place of honour in her mind at that moment.

"I shall have to go and dress soon," said Violet. "I wish they would come."

Even as she spoke there was the noise of men's entrance, Bertie's hearty voice and laugh. the clattering of feet on the stone floor, and much bustle. The door of the drawing-room, where the two girls were sitting in such peaceful quiet, was burst open; Bertie put in his fair head, and seeing that the room was occupied, and not by his mother, came in altogether, and advanced to the ruddy hearth.



"Against rules, Bertie," said Violet, in gentle reminder.

"Oh, bother. We aren't muddy—not 'to speak of. We've had a splendid run," he exclaimed, rubbing his hands. "Were in at the death—Jessie Egerton, too, if you please!"

"How can you be so cruel as to run a poor fox to death?" said a sweet, laughing voice from the lounge which held the gleaming folds of light silk, revealed but dimly in the uncertain light.

The voice made the second booted and spurred figure now approaching start—even stop short for a second—while Bertie cried out—

"Oh, Miss Fane, are you there! How d'ye do? I didn't see you in this owl's light. But what nonsense to talk like that!" he began, remonstratingly.

Violet interrupted him. "Sibyl, dear, this is Mr. Lester. Mr. Lester, Miss Fane."

Sibyl rose and held out her hand, the fire-light flashing on her jewels, and on the brilliant smile with which she acknowledged the introduction.

"I have met Mr. Lester before," she said, serenely.

Mr. Lester bowed gravely over her hand, murmured an inarticulate response, and drew back into the shadow again.

"Gentlemen must hunt," cried Bertie, rushing to the attack once more.

Sibyl shook her head in smiling dissent.

"I don't see the necessity."

"But—Miss Fane!"

"It is cruel."

"Oh, if it comes to that!—why, in that case, you might object to all sport."

"So I do," she said, calmly.

"Good heavens!" gasped Bertie, thrown into a helpless state of astonishment and horror at hearing such an audacious assertion.

"You must finish your dispute after, Bertie. It is time to dress," said Violet. "Arguments to convince Sibyl of her mistake will no doubt come into your head while you are making yourself presentable."

"I'm not so sure," said Bertie, ruefully, as he prepared to move. "I'm no hand at argument—if you'll help me, Lester, we might do it. eh?"

"I protest!" exclaimed Sibyl. "Two against one! How can you suggest anything so abominably unfair?"

"Well, then, I'll gracefully withdraw and leave Lester to take up the cudgels for our sports."

"I did not think you could be so unkind.

Bertie," said Sibyl, reproachfully. "Have you heard Mr. Lester argue? He will talk sensibly, earnestly, exhaustively—he will quote—he will compare the opinions of learned authorities—in short, he will crush me utterly, and without remorse. Cudgels! It would be a blacksmith bringing the whole force of his hammer to crack a china cup."

"By Jove!" Bertie stared with admiration at the barrister. "Really? Is it professional training, do you suppose?"

"That is all," replied Lester, who had heard Sibyl's nonsense with unmoved gravity. "But no professional skill can crush a lady's arguments."

Sibyl made a gesture of deprecation, and hurried past Lester, who had opened the door for Violet, and was standing beside it. "I must fly," she cried. "I always prefer the prudent part of valour." She glanced back archly. "You would have shown mercy had it not been just before dinner."

She went up-stairs to Violet's room, and made a careful inspection of herself in the glass. Her glittering hair was in its careless order and needed no re-arranging, and she was in brilliant looks with that rose flush on her soft cheeks, and the shining light in her grey eyes. She talked gaily to Violet as she drew on her gloves, and

when the maid had buttoned them, and re-clasped her bracelets, she returned to the drawing-room.

The candles were lit, and the curtains were drawn. For a short time Sibyl had the room to herself. The first to appear was Hugo Lester. He must have made a hurried toilet. Had he hoped to find her alone? she wondered, as he walked the length of the long room towards her. What would he say? It was some surprise to her to find that her heart beat a little faster as he approached.

"I am glad to get a chance of seeing you alone," said Lester, speaking hurriedly.

"Yes?" with a sweet, charming smile.

"I wish to assure you that I had no idea of meeting you here."

She laughed. "I saw that."

"I would not have accepted Lorimer's invitation had I known," with low-toned emphasis.

She made a little bow of thanks.

"I wish you to understand that. After the frank expression of your wishes conveyed to me by Mrs. Fane, it was quite out of the question for me to thrust myself upon you—knowingly."

"I quite understand." She smiled at him again. "I am unfortunate in having incurred such lasting displeasure."

Lester threw back his head in haughty surprise, and looked at her coldly.

The flush deepened on Sibyl's cheeks, and involuntarily she bit her lip. It was one thing to talk of displeasure and another to see it so distinctly shown—a very new experience for Sibyl, and an almost startling one.

“He is angrier even than I expected,” she thought, and was glad the door opened at that moment.

Oscar was announced. Relief at the interruption made Sibyl greet him with great cordiality. The last time she had seen him her manner had been cold and distant, and she had intended it to be the same this evening. The sudden change to gracious friendliness brought the blood to his cheek, and a sharp, almost suspicious, look into his dark eyes—eyes that had shown lately a harassed, restless expression. He carried a roll of music in his hand.

“We are going to have a grand drill with Mr. Barlowe this evening—how good of you to practise!” said Sibyl.

“I haven't sung a note since our last practice here. In fact, I have half a mind to throw the whole affair up,” said Oscar, shortly.

“Mr. Ardley! and you have the best voice of any of the amateurs!”

He gave her a strange, doubtful glance—a glance which would have reminded her of the need for careful behaviour towards him had she been thinking about him at all.

Lester had betaken himself to a distant table, and was turning over the leaves of a book.

Oscar walked a step or two nearer the piano, tossed his song upon it, and returned, observing : “I don’t like the prospect of making myself a fool before a hall full of people.”

“But you won’t make yourself a fool,” she pleaded. “If you desert us, the concert will be spoilt—utterly spoilt! We depend upon you.”

Oscar laughed—not very pleasantly. Mr. Lester turned over the leaves fast.

“You are not in earnest, Mr. Ardley?” said Sibyl.

“Oh, dear no! It is not worth being in earnest about.”

“Indeed it is! *I* am in earnest—you surely cannot refuse to oblige me?”

Again he looked at her oddly, excitedly, and this time she caught the look.

“You know I cannot,” he said, in a voice just audible to her.

But Sibyl had seen the danger signal. She threw herself into a chair, saying carelessly—

"I have set my heart upon the success of the concert, and so I know has Mrs. Lorimer. Ah, here she is."

Mr. Barlowe came after dinner, and the practising was duly performed; but the fastidious musician was not as well pleased as on former occasions. Miss Fane, it is true, surpassed herself, and won his approving smile; but Miss Lorimer sang without animation or pleasure; Mr. Ardley's performance was spiritless and careless; while Bertie, in happy recklessness and monotony, sang at the top of his voice, and then turned to his friend for applause.

"Not bad, eh, Lester? do you think it'll go down?"

"I think there's no doubt of it," said Lester, who had placed himself near his hostess, and took, apparently, little notice of the performers. "People will be obliged to listen."

"Too loud, eh?" said Bertie. "Perhaps sentiment will go down better—what do you think, Barlowe?"

"There is sentiment in this song; if you would sing those parts rather—rather more softly, you would get contrast and relief," said Mr. Barlowe.

"I see. Oh, I'll put the expression and all that sort of thing in on the evening. It will be

easy then; one will be excited, and more up to it," said Bertie, with happy confidence.

Fane came in half way through the singing, and joined the two near the fire. He was grave and depressed, and as silent as civility would allow. Mrs. Lorimer supposed some bad case was troubling him, and mercifully forbore teasing him with talk. But Violet, not being so well versed in the trials of medical men, felt sad—almost dismayed. Had her love no power to make him throw off outside worries in her presence?—was it of such slight consequence to him?

During the bustle of the preparations for departure, when Sibyl was being cloaked by Bertie, and Oscar was getting into his overcoat, she went to Fane, where he stood a little apart in the hall, and stole her hand into his. He started almost nervously at the soft touch, and nearly let her hand go, then recollected himself and clasped it, smiling with some effort at her anxious, up-turned face.

"Is anything the matter, Austin?"

"The matter? No—how should there be?"

"Are you not well?"

"I'm always well," with a half-laugh.

She looked at him wistfully, sorrowfully. The look irritated him—he was not in a state of



mind to bear patiently any questions about his looks and manner.

"Well, Violet?" he said, more coldly than he was aware of.

The tone, almost more than the words, seemed to Violet to disclaim her right to take so much interest in his affairs. She blushed vividly, and drew away her hand, looking hurt.

Fane was compunctious in a moment. He put his arm round her as she was turning from him, and kissed her.

"Good night, dear," he said, kindly. "I am all right. Don't trouble your little head about me—a doctor gets worried sometimes, you know."

She smiled, and let it appear that a few gentle words had satisfied her; but she was not satisfied. She instinctively recognised that the caress and the words were of the easy kind used to comfort a child, and her deep love resented childlike treatment. For once she had almost shrunk from his caress, and although she had submitted, it was with a strong feeling that something was wanting; that she was not receiving justice from the man who had gained her heart, and, gentle as she was, she rebelled against the slight consideration in which he held all that she had given him. The limited rôle of plaything for his unoccupied hours did not content her.

There were no traces of low spirits about Sibyl next morning. Dr. Fullagher would have rejoiced to see her sunny face, and to hear her singing over her household tasks, and would, no doubt, have expressed his pleasure in a cynical remark upon the changeableness and general unaccountableness of feminine nature.

Shortly after eleven, Bertie appeared, bringing a message from Violet, and a pattern of silk. Violet had a little cold, and could not come into town that day; she would be grateful if Sibyl would match the silk for her, and spend the afternoon and evening at the Hall.

"It seems Barlowe thinks we are still behind-hand, and mother is anxious we should make the most of the time that's left. Only a week!—by Jove!" said Bertie, with some importance, as he thought of the great event. "I'm beginning to feel funky already."

Sibyl accepted Violet's commission and invitation, and accompanied Bertie to the door to see him mount. Mr. Lester sat on horseback without, holding his friend's horse, and waiting with the patient look of a man who endures. Why had he not come in? thought Sibyl, in incredulous amazement. Could a man really be mortally offended with her? She felt inclined to regard her old lover as a natural curiosity.

He raised his hat and bowed formally when she appeared in the doorway. The pale, winter sunshine fell lovingly upon her, lighting up the fair hair, the clear eyes, and rosy lips, into delicate brightness, and warming the rich, deep colour of her fur-trimmed dress. Bertie found something to adjust about his saddle, and Sibyl flashed a smile straight up into Lester's grave, unmoved face.

"Mr. Lester," she said, softly.

Of course he was obliged to dismount to hear what she had to say. He did not show any flattering alacrity of movement, however. He approached the steps almost reluctantly.

"I am so sorry," said Sibyl.

He looked politely attentive.

"Do you know what Mr. Lorimer's message was?" she asked.

"Something about some silk, I fancy."

"Part of it. But I did not mean that—he brought me a pressing invitation for to-day. It is very unfortunate."

"Indeed," said Lester, indifferently, glancing up the street.

"Yes. After what you said last evening, I feel how unfortunate it is—but it is not too late—I can send an excuse."

She looked at him with serene gravity, a smile of mischief dancing in her eyes.

Lester brought his from the street, and gave her a full glance of anger.

“That must be as you please, of course,” he said, coldly, and turned to his horse. Bertie was already in the saddle.

Sibyl bowed them off smilingly, and re-entered the house.

“I think I will go,” she said to herself, after some thought upon the matter. “He is amusing when he is so frankly angry. I must try and soften him—I don’t like men to be angry with me.”





## CHAPTER XIV.

### AT THE FACTORY.

“ It may wel be he loked on hir face  
In such a wise, as man that axeth grace,  
But nothing wiste sche of his intent.”

CHAUCER.

“ My heart hath failed me.”—*Psalm* xl. 15.

MONA would undoubtedly have seen cause for self-gratulation had she known how deeply her dart had pierced and how distressing was its rankling pain. Fane did not know the exact words she had repeated to Miss Romney, but he was well enough aware of the frankness of his speech generally on the subject of lady-doctors. The remembrance of this frankness brought with it the hot sting of shame. His prejudice, and above all, his free utterance of it, struck him now as being narrow, commonplace—almost vulgar. He could not bear to think of her having heard his views—they

seemed so intensely arrogant and small-minded now. What could she think of a man who stooped to throw taunts and denunciations at her fellow-women? He felt sure she was generous and reasonable enough not to resent his efforts to win the best living he might; but she must only despise him for using an unneeded weapon. His easy scorn and contempt recoiled upon himself. It was unutterably bitter to remember how he had ranked her, and the commonplace, popular nature of his remarks upon her. He had sided with the vulgar herd of ignorant and narrow-minded people against her—and she knew that he had done so! The hard part was, there seemed no way of clearing himself, and of separating himself from the hateful multitude.

Fane had wished he could replace her in the position in which she had been at his coming, and had chafed against his powerlessness to undo the already done; but he writhed more under this further impossibility—the impossibility of letting her know the entire change of his opinions as far as she was concerned—of disclaiming any bond of union with the people who had cast her off. He could do nothing. He could say nothing. Lovers in

old times certainly enjoyed advantages denied to lovers in the present day—they could give practical signs of their devotion. A man must have felt it a relief when he could break a lance before the eyes of all men for his lady, or do her service by fighting her enemies. To receive a wound, even defeat, must surely have been more satisfactory than to suffer the absolute inaction of the nineteenth-century spectator.

Two or three days after Mona's attack, however, Fane fancied he saw an opportunity for proving his belief in Miss Romney's ability and knowledge.

There happened to be a fire at Mr. Chutterworth's factory. The fire began in a narrow wing, and was fortunately got under before reaching the main part of the building. The damage to property was small, but, owing to some mismanagement, several women were hurt—some by the fire, some by falling beams. Fane, as he was passing the factory on his return from his morning's round, was stopped by the foreman, and asked to give medical aid to the sufferers at once. He sent his coachman home for necessary appliances, and followed the foreman to the room where the injured were sitting or lying. Two or three had fainted,

and he ordered water to be brought, and set to work to restore them, unable to do more until his man returned.

The fire-engine rattled away, and greater part of the crowd in the street without dispersed, the visible source of excitement being at an end.

In going from one patient to another, Fane passed a window looking up the street, and glanced out to see if his coachman was returning. His own carriage was not in sight, but his glance fell on another brougham—one he knew was Miss Romney's.

An idea flashed into his mind that brought a quick light to his eyes. He turned to the foreman, who was fussing in and out.

"These people ought to be seen to as quickly as possible," he said. "Miss Romney—Dr. Romney is coming down the street—just stop her, will you? Tell her there has been an accident, and that she is wanted."

He said this as composedly as if it was as much a matter of course to call in Miss Romney to help him as it would be to call in his own assistant—supposing him to possess one. The foreman hastily obeyed the imperative tone, only looking slightly surprised.

Fane returned to his work, while he waited



in considerable excitement. Of course she must obey the summons—no doctor could refuse such an appeal; yet he felt all the disturbance of suspense—he would see her, speak to her, hear her voice, and what was more, she would learn that he believed in her. With his disbelief in woman's powers, it seemed to him that he was making the most decided confession of faith in this one woman's; it was the best, the completest way, surely, in which to tell her and the whole town that he recognised her as a fellow-practitioner, and that he respected her qualifications. He was keenly aware of the significance of his act—the fire, the number of injured, the doctors' names—his and hers—would be in the papers, and all over Wanningster to-morrow. It gave him an exultant feeling to think she would share the advantage of this publicity with him. He was not helpless after all—he could do this to show his belief in her, and to make public recantation of his former heresies.

He was too fully occupied with the curious triumph and sweetness of this thought to doubt because the carrying out of his plan lay in Miss Romney's hands, rather than his own. She might refuse to act with him; yet, if she did refuse, he had still asked her—nothing could alter that.

He was bending over one of the women, exactly facing the door, so that he could see Edith as soon as she appeared. In less than five minutes after he had despatched the foreman he heard his voice just without the open door of the room.

"This way, ma'am. They're all together."

Fane raised his head. Edith stood on the threshold, framed in by the doorway. His figure was the first thing to catch her eye as he straightened himself from his stooping posture, rising up tall and dark against the window behind. She stopped short. A bright wave of colour swept over her pale, still face, a shrinking expression of insulted dignity—so Fane read it, in dismay. She turned to Wright, the foreman, as quickly as if she had been stung.

"There is some mistake," she said, in clear, cold tones of hauteur.

In an instant Fane had crossed the room and reached the door. "Miss Romney!" he said, putting out involuntarily a detaining hand. Before he could add another word, she had drawn back a step and faced him.

"I did not know you were here," she said, speaking quickly and looking straight at him with proud, dark eyes. "It is a mistake—the man did not tell me a doctor was here already."

"The doctor said he needed help, ma'am," said Wright.

Edith, who had glanced at him as he spoke, started, and looked again at Fane.

"You?" she said, involuntarily.

The tone of uncontrollable amazement, almost incredulity, brought the blood to his face as if the ejaculation were a lash.

This was a kind of aside between the beginning and ending of Wright's phlegmatic remark.

"It was him as said you was to be called in."

She still looked into Fane's face, as if to read his reason, and before those gravely searching eyes he felt confused; seen in their light, his act appeared a piece of unpardonable patronage.

"I took the liberty of calling you in to the help of these poor creatures," he said, feeling a necessity upon him of making the most of what excuse there could be made out of the real urgency of the need for help. "There are several hurt; they need surgical aid as quickly as possible. They are suffering—for heaven's sake help me to dress their wounds! One cannot do it fast enough."

For the first time Edith looked beyond him

into the room. Her eyes fell on a young girl seated on the floor, leaning against a bench in a half-fainting condition. Her hands were badly burnt. Edith's face softened to the gentlest pity.

"Ah! poor things!" she said, and moved.

Fane drew aside; she walked swiftly past him, and was half-way across the floor towards the poor sufferer, when she stopped short and turned round. Fane, who was looking after her with a curious conflict between chagrin and reverential admiration in his expression, followed a few steps as she paused and glanced at him.

"I don't know whether I ought to go or stay, Dr. Fane," she said, hurriedly, with a certain proud frankness in her voice and manner. "Had you not been already called in, I should have felt no hesitation; but," with a compassionate, eager glance round, "where so many are hurt it is surely only common humanity to put professional etiquette second."

Fane bowed in silence as he tasted the mortifying experience of having made a mistake.

The next moment Edith was kneeling on the floor beside the fainting girl.

A man entered, bringing the lint and dressings

Fane had sent for. Fane put the greater part of them near Edith, who courteously thanked him as she chose what she needed.

Work began in good earnest now.

Fane, as he dressed and bandaged, cast glances ever and again at his fellow-worker, and yielded cordial admiration of her skill and readiness. He had felt no doubt of her powers; his faith was of the sublime kind; she was of too honest a nature to attempt any work, least of all such important work, unless she possessed the power to do it. And a strange regret mingled with his admiration as he saw how well qualified she was—how firm, gentle, sure and capable; the greater her gifts for her chosen career, the harder must be her suffering for her late defeat. Her low soothing voice was the sweetest, saddest music ever heard by him. It must be confessed that in listening to it and in thinking about her he performed his own task in a somewhat perfunctory manner, and was unusually sparing of encouraging words to his patients. What struck him most forcibly was the entire absence of prejudice or small-mindedness on her part. She was exquisite in reasonableness. She must hate him—that was a foregone conclusion—yet she paused once when they happened to be rather near together, and asked his opinion on a small

matter. He gave it in a cool, matter-of-fact way; but the unexpected address, the "Dr. Fane" from her lips, and the courteous glance from her grave dark eyes, made his pulses beat fast and unsteadily for a minute or two.

When their work was finished, the two doctors were taken into a small room and supplied with means for washing their hands.

A few remarks were exchanged about the different cases, and some commonplaces followed about the fire and its probable cause, Edith taking the lead, for she seemed anxious to treat Fane as much as possible like an ordinary acquaintance. He fancied that she was hurrying, and that there was a faint trace of nervous excitement in her manner.

She had taken off her jacket in order to work more comfortably; and, after washing her hands, she looked round for it and put her hand for a moment confusedly to her head. Fane remembered seeing the jacket lying on a chair in the other room. He hastened to fetch it. As he returned to the lavatory, he caught a glimpse of her standing, white to the lips, with one hand leaning heavily upon the rough table, and the other pressed to her head. The sound of his step made her change her attitude in a moment.

"Good heavens!" thought he in concern and

some indignation, "it has been too much for her after all. What can one expect from a delicate woman? Why had she not mercy upon herself?"

"Thank you," said Edith, accepting his help with her jacket.

Fane, as he looked at the beautiful sad face, the downcast eyes, and lips rather firmly set together, while she fastened it, felt a strong impulse to say some word expressive of his concern—an impulse which was checked by the remembrance of her profession and his expressed dislike of it—the same reason that prevented anything like ordinary intercourse between them. His former frankness of speech obliged him to hesitate, and restrain the involuntary, "How ill you look! I fear it has been too much for you." A doctor's nerves were supposed to be steeled to the sight of the most ghastly bodily injuries, and he instinctively understood the greater hardening required from a woman. A man could afford to indulge the whim of faintness, confident of its being set down to merely momentary weakness; a lady-doctor must show herself stronger than the strongest man; she must be absolutely divested of nerves; no fatigue must tire her. Fane, therefore, repressed his exclamation;—slighted as Miss Romney had been, how could he tell but that she might resent it from him?



that she might even fancy she heard in it the ring of triumph or contempt? But, in spite of his compunction, he chafed against the barrier between them which prevented his uttering a mere commonplace regret—a regret he could express to fifty acquaintances for politeness' sake, but which seemed impossible to express to her.

He felt almost irritated at the perfection of her reserve and dignity—the unreasonable irritation of a man who resents being taken too precisely at his word.

Edith was ready. She looked dubiously at Fane as though meditating a farewell. He seized his hat and showed his intention of seeing her to her carriage.

“Will you let me thank you for coming to my help just now?” he said, as they walked down the long passage leading to the entrance. “I think, too, that I ought to apologise for my unceremoniousness.”

There was a moment's pause. No disclaimer either of thanks or apology came from his companion. She appeared to regard his remark as unfinished.

“My excuse must be the hurry of the moment,” he said, with embarrassment, wondering bitterly how he could have made such a blunder—how he could have been presumptuous enough to



suppose a trifle like this could make any indemnification for her losses. "I wished to do the best I could, but—" he hesitated, glanced at her, and then added abruptly, "it was a mistake, and I fear an unpardonable one."

"Oh no. I am glad to have been of use in such an emergency," said Edith, slowly and formally.

And Fane felt the impossibility of saying more. He had given her an opening for accusation, for indignation; she ignored the opening, and the curious longing excitement that had dictated his words died down. He might have known she would not stoop to one or the other—yet he had desired the relief of condemning and of defending himself.

At the end of the passage they came face to face with Mr. Chutterworth and Jack. Mr. Chutterworth looked pale and shaken.

"Hullo, doctor!" he began, in rather less assured accents than usual, and then broke off in the extremity of his amazement at beholding the doctor's companion. "By Jove! Miss Romney!" he murmured, staring.

"I have been acting as Dr. Fane's assistant," said Edith.

"Miss Romney was passing," said Fane, a mingling of impatience and hauteur in his tone

as he surveyed the manufacturer from his superior height, "and I took the liberty of asking for her help. Thanks to her, the poor women are made comfortable in half the time."

Mr. Chutterworth looked exceedingly nervous and ill at ease. He coughed, averted his gaze from Edith, and feebly ejaculated, "By Jove!"

"I say it's awfully good of you, you know," said Jack, who had learned his duty towards the lady-doctor from his betrothed. "I'm sure we're awfully obliged," and he shook her hand cordially, if awkwardly.

"Yes, I'm sure," said his father, awakening to a sense of propriety and coughing loudly—"I'm sure—much obliged—er—er. How many are knocked off work, doctor?" turning with relief to Fane.

"Some ten or twelve," replied Fane, curtly.

Mr. Chutterworth whistled. "That's money out of my pocket," he said with pathetic self-pity. "It's deuced 'ard lines on a man, deuced 'ard lines; I wish I could find out whose to blame—there's some stupid carelessness at the bottom of it, I'll be sworn, and I'd like to find it out—Oh, good morning, good morning, Miss Romney." as Edith bowed and moved to pass on. "I say, doctor, I'd like to speak to you. I feel awfully upset; and now those unlucky devils are seen to—"

“In a moment,” said Faue, hurriedly.

He hastened to overtake Miss Romney. She was passing through the open door.

“Miss Romney,” he exclaimed, impulsively, “I am very sorry—I should have known—”

She looked at him in surprise, and Faue reddened. The first effect of her glance was to check him as her slight reply had checked him before, but this time he rebelled against the restraining influence.

“May I not tell you I am very sorry?” he said, with a passionate confusion of feeling in his wretched dark eyes. It seemed to him that she involuntarily flinched and drew up her head a little. He went on impetuously, almost defiantly, as it flashed into his head that, as things were between them, she might resent his expression of regret.

“It was a stupid, an unpardonable blunder—I cannot expect you to excuse it, but you must at least allow me to express my deep regret. I—I—cannot explain,” he said, with a dark flush, “but pray believe that had I remembered the probability of its causing you annoyance, I would not have dreamed of troubling you.”

Edith heard him, faintly wondering—his perturbation was so real, his apologies were so sincere.

"Of course, I know that," she said, in earnest and courteous assurance. "You could not help Mr. Chutterworth's surprise; after all, it was only natural."

She paused, as if not knowing what more to say, and again the confused look passed over her face. Two or three patients were leaving the factory, and she glanced after them.

"I should like to know how they get on," she said, with nervous haste. "That poor girl, who is so badly hurt, do you know where she lives? I should like to send to inquire."

"There is no need for you to have that trouble," said Fane. "I can send you word—or if you will allow me to call and tell you—" he spoke eagerly, with a sudden lighting up of his face, and then broke off—his proposal was too presumptuous.

"I do not like to give you so much trouble," said Edith, doubtfully.

"Trouble!—it would be none. I should—I should be only too happy to do it."

"Thank you," she said, simply. Surely this man behaved strangely for an avowed enemy? She did not like the idea of accepting this civility from him; but she could not find any excuse for avoiding his call—she was longing to get away; every moment appeared intolerable,

and increased her dread of disclosing her weakness. Yet she must bear anything rather than betray by the slightest sign how ill she was feeling. She got into the carriage, and as Fane was about to shut the door, she put out her hand to him. He took it reverently, fully aware that it was the first time he had touched her hand.

Edith sat rigidly upright during the drive home, looking straight before her with hands clasped tightly on her lap. By a strong effort she kept back the faintness which had threatened her at the end of the wound-dressing. The cold air entering freely at the open window helped her. It was a great relief to reach her own house. She crept weakly up-stairs to her bed-room, locked the door, and managed to reach the couch before the deadly sensation made everything slide from her in unconsciousness. Several minutes passed before she awoke from the swoon. Full consciousness returned as she opened her eyes, and full remembrance. She sat up feeling weaker than she had ever felt in her life before. Wearily she took off her hat and then her gloves; that done, she clasped her hands and looked before her in despair.

The morbidness and depression from which she was suffering had lately—since that evening

when she had first met Austin Fane in society, in fact—taken a new, and the most painful, development for a conscientious nature. Her confidence was shaken; the happy assured confidence, the belief in herself and her abilities, which had caused her to overcome obstacles so easily and courageously, had left her. She was unsupported by any strength within. The repeated proofs of distrust that had been so pitilessly showered upon her, had complete and terrible effect. She had begun to ask whether people might not be right. She had begun to wonder whether, after all, she had not made a mistake. Her detractors would surely have considered her presumption heavily enough punished, could they have understood one iota of the suffering caused by that bitter doubt.

A mistake—a career she had chosen in all the generous ardour of her impulsive youth, a work she had fitted herself for so eagerly and with such fine pleasure, which she had begun with all the enthusiasm of her warm aspiring nature—was it, could it be possible that all that longing fervour, that exquisite enjoyment, that passionate desire to do well good and useful work, that all these were parts of a mistake?—that feeling so, longing so, and hoping so, she ought to have disregarded the longings and the hopes, stifled and

repressed them—simply because a woman? The world required from her sex repression of energies and impulses, stifling of hopes and ambitions, unless these energies and hopes were directed towards the few prizes recognised as being within women's reach.

For none of these prizes had she any desire. She had chosen the work she could do, and in these days of humiliation and defeat must ask herself if her choice had been wrong, and her dreams delusions. And so dark were these days, so languid were her energies, and so thorough was her defeat, that it seemed to her she must answer, yes. She had been too young, too ignorant of life, too innocent of the world, to understand all her choice involved. What had she known of that weight of custom "heavy as frost, and deep almost as life?"—of the blindness that will not see, of the prejudice too narrow and rigid for moving except by long years and repeated assaults upon its traditions? The difficulties and annoyances she had met with during her college course had been to her, in her ardent innocence, the ordinary disagreeables of life, to be accepted as such, and borne as fogs and east winds. She understood the significance of many things that had happened during these last years—trifles she had hardly noticed at the

time ; it was strange, it was almost startling, the clearness with which they came back to her remembrance, and all pointed the same way. At first she was struck with a pitiful sort of amazement at her own blindness. She had lived in a dream, in a fatuous delusion, all these years ; and now she was the scorn of a whole town.

Miss Jacques had told her once she came before her time. Edith thought she could bear to believe that, she could submit patiently to failure, did her attempt help those to come after ; the intolerable bitterness lay in the last doubt—the doubt of women's capacity for her profession. Greater part,—by far the greater part,—of the world declared women to be unfitted, physically and mentally ; and Edith, in her new, unusual weakness, almost bowed to the hard sentence.

A few days ago Sarah had cut her hand, and had come to have it bound up. Edith, as she did the simple little bit of dressing, felt faint and sick ; and after the old servant had left her—not omitting a frank comment upon her mistress's pallor in the “just-what-might-be-expected” style—the young doctor suffered an agony of dismay. It was in vain she told herself she was out of health and out of spirits, that in her ordinary health the sight of blood did not



produce that sickened sensation—she was in the state of depression that cannot realise, or even hope for, a change. And besides, there was no comfort to be found in the fact of her own ill-health—it proved her woman's weakness. Then came this faint, which seemed to prove it unmistakably. She could only clasp her hands, and look round with unseeing eyes, in her despair.

What was left for her? The spring of her life was broken—her mistake must have far-reaching effect. The days to come were rendered stale and valueless and saltless by the false start. It seemed as if what she had already done had paralysed both brain and energies—surely this also was a sign that she had gone beyond her woman's strength. What else could be the meaning of this benumbing apathy of all her energies?—this shrinking from action and decision? She could only think of her trouble. Even pride would not help her to bestir herself. The place, the people, the well-known sights and sounds, were all repulsive, and yet her mind could not grapple with the necessity for change. She shrank from every detail of moving—the deciding where to go, the choosing a house, the arrangements for settling and starting afresh in her profession, and every practical consideration.

She dreaded a repetition of her start in Wanningster, capable only of remembering the difficulties and annoyances. And how could another start be made without hope of at least some share of success?—only the buoyancy of hope could support her; and she had lost it.

She was interrupted by a knock at the door—Sarah's own peculiar knock—a knock that demanded admission and attention. Edith hastily took off her jacket, and opened the door. Sarah advanced into the room with an uncompromising stride and expression.

“Dinner's been ready and waiting this hour and a half, Miss Edith. That stoopid Eliza's just told me as she seen you come in above half an hour ago. The meat 'll be cooked to a cinder; and as for the vegetables!”—Words failed her.

“Get your dinner, Sarah—you and Eliza. I would rather have some tea.”

Edith spoke with something like diffidence. Sarah disapproved strongly of any “makeshift” in the way of food, and Edith was conscious of having been guilty in this matter lately. The old servant looked at her with eager, anxious eyes.

“Is it one of them headaches?” she said, lowering her voice, and controlling the harassed impatience of her solicitude.

“My head does ache,” was the reluctant confession. The effort of keeping up an appearance of her usual health was fast getting beyond her power. She shrank from letting Sarah suspect how ill she felt at times; too nervously afraid of that “I told you so” reception, which would, so to speak, set the seal to her incapacity and despair. And yet she had all a sick child’s longing to throw herself upon the care and strength of a loving, sympathetic someone. It was a terrible strain, this keeping up before Sarah’s jealous, watchful eyes.

“There’s not much good in tea,” grumbled Sarah. “It won’t feed no one. Will you have a nice light-boiled egg with it?”

“Very well,” said Edith, meekly. The thought of food was hateful; but she could only give in, and attempt the impossible.

And Sarah stole away to prepare the meal; while Edith sank down by her writing-table, laid her arms upon it and hid her face. The loneliness, the pain, the weakness, and her trouble, bowed her down with a confusion of wretchedness too great even for the cry, What shall I do?



## CHAPTER XV.

### FANE GOES HIS ROUNDS.

ALTHOUGH his plan had failed,—for, as far as regarded Edith herself, it was evident that it had been a complete failure,—Fane went back into the factory with a glow at his heart, not generally the result of disappointment. She had given him permission to call upon her. He was sure of seeing her again to-morrow.

It was the uplifting consciousness of this fact which sustained him during Mr. Chutterworth's lamentations and complaints: he was cheerfully sympathetic, condoling easily, and yielding a suspiciously ready approval of the manufacturer's threats of vengeance—and this, chiefly, because Mr. Chutterworth forebore to mention Miss Romney's name. Fane agreed that wilful, base, and outrageous malice had actuated the wicked deed; that only the black heart of a malignant and irreclaimable scoundrel

could have been capable of conceiving an act of such profound iniquity; that the police should be set to hunt down this abandoned villain; that the country was unsafe with such a monster at large: that hanging was in proportion to the deserts of this impersonation of iniquity the reward of an upright man; and that to play the passive part in a perpetually enacted illumination such as this morning's was the only penalty that made the slightest approach to adequacy.

Mr. Chutterworth acknowledged the moral support he received during this interview by remarking after to his son that the doctor had been more like himself than he had seen him for many a day.

"He was as pleasant as he used to be before his engagement put conceit into his mind," he observed. "But, hang it all," he added, as the warmth from intelligent sympathy grew colder, "I don't think after all he was as sorry as he might have been—but what could you expect? Of course, it's money into *his* pocket—he'd be chuckling to think of the bill he'll get out of me for those fools of women, confound them! He ought to share the profits with Miss Romney, ha, ha! I'll tell him so when I cash up. If he is so

keen to have half his work done, it's only fair he should lose half the pay—he won't care for that part of the tune; not he!—ha! ha!”

The prospect of that call upon Miss Romney proved a precious talisman against the full annoyance Fane would have suffered otherwise during the chatter about the fire that same day. The account in the papers was hardly necessary next morning, personal report having anticipated the printed. Unluckily, Dr. Fulagher heard the news amongst the first. The brother of Jackson the silent being the father of the chief sufferer, of course the gardener was informed of the family affliction by special messenger in an incredibly short time after the accident occurred. Under the genial influence of “trouble” Jackson's usual reticence gave way a little, and he opened his lips that same afternoon to his master. As Fane was concerned, the doctor exerted himself to drag the news piecemeal from Jackson: and, having become possessed of the facts, he did not fail to make a wordier use of them in five minutes than his gardener would have made in five years. In fact, as Fane frankly told him, he surpassed himself in disagreeableness.

Not content with the afternoon's questions, abuse and sneers, Dr. Fullagher sent Samuel for the evening paper. It gave an account of the fire and of the accidents in magnificently vague terms, but did not mention either of the doctors' names. Nothing daunted by this omission, however, the doctor, armed with the paper, invaded the next house, and marched in upon his victim in the library, where he sat writing letters, and where Sibyl was amusing herself over a novel. Taking up a commanding position on the hearthrug, Fullagher announced that there was an interesting account of a very singular ceremony in that evening's paper, and that, as he knew his friend did not take in 'The Echo,' he had ventured to intrude at this untimely hour in order to let them hear this very curious paragraph.

Sibyl closed the book, and composed herself to listen, while her brother begged him to waste no time in apologies.

Fullagher loudly cleared his throat and then began: "Singular act of restitution."

"This morning an imposing ceremony took place in King Street, in the business premises of the well-known and highly-esteemed manufacturer, Mr. Joel Chutterworth. In itself

the ceremony was simple, but the very simplicity gave it a thrilling and mystic character. All lovers of Utopian principles and Quixotic chivalry should have been present. The scene was the left wing of the noble factory, which was previously prepared by fire—this being an unusual, and, if one may say so, a typical mode of purifying. Here, in the presence of a large and enthusiastic assemblage, an example of soul-stirring moral courage was exhibited. Dr. Fane, a popular and rising practitioner of this town, formally extended the right hand of fellowship to Dr. Edith Romney, his beautiful and accomplished rival. and with tears in his eyes tended to her the—er—the emblems of medical office—a case of surgical instruments and roll of lint. Miss Romney, having gracefully accepted them, and returned thanks in a few well-chosen words, a formal deed of restitution was then read aloud by Mr. Joel Chutterworth, with melodious and impressive emphasis, the chief provision of which was that Dr. Fane faithfully promised to refuse to attend any patient who had at any previous time enjoyed the lady-doctor's ministrations. This being signed by the rival champions of medicine amidst general emotion and deafening applause. Dr. Fane conducted



Dr. Edith Romney to her carriage, which drove off through a dense and loudly-cheering crowd."

"Curious, isn't it?" said the doctor, looking up at his audience with a bland and interested expression.

"It is soul-stirring!" replied Sibyl. "But—what does it mean?"

"Ask your brother," said Fullagher, jerking his head in Fane's direction.

"It means," said Fane, "that Dr. Fullagher has most certainly mistaken his vocation. One can see now why he gives himself the airs of a cynic. How long did it take you to string those 'flowery components' together, doctor?"

"They are what I heard a bumptious wouldbe musician say modestly of his own playing—'quite extempore' (in three syllables). Judging from the specimen of playing so described, I should say he did not exaggerate—only the most promiscuous of extempour efforts could have produced such a succession of incoherent sounds."

Fane took the paper out of his friend's hand, and read the paragraph about the fire. He threw it down at the end, glad that Miss Romney's name was not mentioned—Fullagher's

"beautiful and accomplished rival" was too real and vulgarising a touch. The mortifying consciousness that his deed of "chivalry" had been at best a very blundering and useless one did not make the doctor's ruthless sarcasms and taunts the pleasanter to bear; and next morning, when the full account did appear in the paper, only the certainty of seeing Edith again, which he had gained from the affair, prevented his heartily wishing he had refrained from calling her in to his help, and even his pleasure in that anticipation was gradually deadened by the quantity of talk he heard. His patients were too intensely interested in the one all-important detail.

"Was Miss Romney really there?" was the oft-repeated text of the morning's gossip.

"Didn't you see it in the 'Advertiser?'" returned Fane, bluntly, when asked by Mrs. Warren.

"Yes; but then newspapers do make such mistakes."

"It wasn't the paper this time," thought he, grimly.

"Of course, as you were there you must know. It is very strange!" said Mrs. Warren, with a fixed gaze of helpless astonishment.

“How did it happen she was there when you were? Was it your doing, or Mr. Chutterworth’s?—but it couldn’t be his—he always runs her down so. He has a great contempt for lady-doctors.”

Fane repeated what he had said several times already that morning about the number hurt and the necessity for a second doctor.

“Really? Dear me!” observed Mrs. Warren, with the same vacant bewilderment.

She was a pleasant, active woman, and rather a favourite with Fane; but on this occasion his feelings towards her were not by any means of an amiable kind. Never again, he swore, would he see anything agreeable in her rosy, cheerful face. He knew perfectly well what was in her mind at that moment,—had not he expressed as fine a contempt as the great Chutterworth himself? Remembrance of his own frankly spoken sentiments made Mrs. Warren regard him with round eyes of perplexity.

“I suppose the hurts were only slight,” she observed, at length.

Fane almost laughed in utter bitterness of spirit.

“Not all—there were some nasty burns and bruises.”

"You would take those of course."

"I took one or two," said he, with a smile not easy to read. "Miss Romney had a quick eye for the worst cases—professional training no doubt making her understand they needed attention first."

"But!"—Mrs. Warren looked startled. "Was it right?—at least, were you quite wise to—trust—to risk——"

Fane stared in well-feigned surprise.

"My dear Mrs. Warren! do you not know what her qualifications are?"

"Yes—but——"

"A doctor doesn't get possession of the letters M.D. by failing at examinations."

"No—but—" and then she looked at him with a merry laugh—"She is a doctress, you see!"

Fane did see, failing to appreciate the joke, however. It maddened him to think that the noble, strong, beautiful woman he adored should be criticised and held cheaply by every feather-brained individual like the one before him—that it should be necessary to her content that creatures such as this, vapid, commonplace and narrow, should believe she was capable of what she professed; and that, prove her ability by word and deed as clearly as possible,

no proof would shake the obstinacy of their sublime stupidity. The very temptation he felt to argue with this woman, the knowledge that he would consider it a triumph could he induce her to take the colour of her opinions from his own altered ones, exasperated him as being insults to the lady he wished to honour.

“The examiners don’t make the same considerate allowance,” he said, shortly.

“Well, perhaps not—no, I don’t suppose they do. It would hardly be fair, would it? But still there *is* a feeling, you know.”

Fane rose to go.

Mrs. Warren rose too, with a pleasant leisureliness.

“I should think she would enjoy doing a little bit of doctoring again,” she observed, in a tone of interested speculation. “Dear me, I don’t suppose she has more than one or two patients left.”

Fane was energetically buttoning his coat; he stopped a moment in the operation, and cast an almost blankly wondering glance at her.

“Good heavens!” thought he; “is the woman absolutely devoid of feeling?”

“I don’t think she can have more,” added Mrs. Warren, musingly.

"The greater fools the people," muttered Fane, a speech that could hardly have been dictated by the theory of humbug.

Mrs. Warren was not one to take offence easily; she was very fond of Dr. Fane, so she declared, and this spurt of temper only made her laugh heartily.

"Oh, come, doetor! you at least ought not to say so! Why, if it were not for Miss Lorimer. I should really begin to think there was something behind this warm ehampionship; really, it looks suspicious! I am sure Miss Lorimer ought to be warned! Good morning, good morning!"

After the twelfth house or so Fane was forced to admit that even the change-loving Wanningssterians set some limit to their caprices. Yesterday's occurrence provided as ample a meal for chatter as could have been desired for any purpose of publicity, but it had nothing of the very simple result he had expected; people apparently needed more than the light provided by a not too liberal nature to read in Miss Romney's attendance at the factory his conviction of her abilities and skill—it was an interesting piece of gossip, but it was not instructive as a revelation.

But Mrs. Lorimer was the worst. She was reading the paper when Fane was ushered into

her sitting-room, and she held it in her hand as she greeted him, deep solemnity upon her brow.

“Is this account of the fire at Mr. Chutterworth’s factory true?” she inquired, at once.

“Slightly exaggerated, of course. The main part of the building is not by any means a ‘blackened ruin,’ nor are any of the women injured fatally. Those statements will be contradicted, no doubt, in the next issue.”

“I mean about Miss Romney.”

“Yes; that’s true enough.”

“My dear Austin,” in her deepest tones, “what shall you do?”

“Do? I don’t understand.”

“About this extraordinary behaviour on Mr. Chutterworth’s part. It is unaccountable! I could not have believed that even he—ill-bred as he is—even he could be guilty of such a slight to you. I scarcely know what to advise. On the one hand, his conduct is unwarrantable; but then he is the wealthiest man in the town, and the connection——”

“Mr. Chutterworth had nothing to do with it,” exclaimed Fane.

“Not?” in astonishment. “Miss Romney could surely——”

“Not insist upon treating the injured?” and Fane laughed, not very pleasantly. “Oh no!

She showed no anxiety at all—on the contrary. It was my doing—she only consented to help when she saw the poor things in pain. The sight of suffering always appeals to a woman's heart, you know."

Something she could neither define nor understand in his voice and manner made Mrs. Lorimer pause before she replied. Then she spoke with a certain hesitation and restraint.

"I am glad Mr. Chutterworth has not done what I feared," she said. "Very glad. Unpleasantness of any kind is—er—is disagreeable. He is a very influential man, and it is better for you to have his good word than his bad one."

"The good one won't be spoken as loudly as the other though," observed Fane.

This flippancy was received with an indulgent smile. Mrs. Lorimer would have ignored it altogether had any one but Fane uttered it; but she had not been quite at her ease with him lately; a fear had crossed her mind that extremely careful management would be needed to prevent him from slipping from her fingers.

"He is rather boisterous, certainly," she said, "and that is one reason why I consider it a good thing he is still satisfied—he is so terribly outspoken." Here Mrs. Lorimer coughed. "It was



very good of you, my dear Austin, to allow Miss Romney to help you ; it was most kind."

Fane reddened hotly, and made a restless movement in his chair. "I didn't 'allow' her—you are mistaken, Mrs. Lorimer. I sent out to her as she was passing—I begged her to help. She didn't think it either good or kind, I assure you—she didn't like it at all."

Mrs. Lorimer shook her head with the smile that says, you must allow me to differ from you there.

"It was a generous deed, my dear Austin ; just one to be expected from your warm, impulsive temperament. You are the soul of chivalry ; would that there were more like you. But," with ponderous playfulness, "was it quite prudent ? quite worldly-wise ? Ah, I fear not ! Self-interest—a shocking doctrine, but none the less true—self-interest is the first and last rule for men who are making their way. But, after all," relenting to hopefulness, "it is too late in the day for any harm to be done even by such a dangerous deed of generosity. Miss Romney's chances are over in Wanningster. I really wonder she does not leave the town at once."

"How did you sleep last night ?" interrupted Fane, in his suavest professional tones.

Mrs. Lorimer was under medical treatment ;

and Violet was keeping out of the way until the business part of her lover's visit was over.

When Fane left the Hall, after cutting his visit as short as propriety permitted, he threw himself into his brougham in an extremity of exasperation. What superhuman gift of patience was needed for dealing with the ignorant, commonplace, only partially-developed beings composing a professional man's public?—the patience of Job? But Job's case possessed alleviations; his tormentors chiefly confined their observations to him and to his own affairs, they were strictly limited in number, and he was not dependent upon their good opinion for a living. And, in the midst of his fury against the people, Fane felt a kind of fiercely-tender anger against Edith herself. Why, oh why, had she gone forth into the world? Why had she chosen a position of such publicity that her name was bandied about like any common man's? He had heard it again and again this morning.

He had left his factory patients till last,—the two or three who were hurt severely enough to need further attention,—for he wished to take Edith the latest news possible; and as he drove to the poor part of the town, he turned with relief from the intolerable chafing he had endured in the houses of the well-to-do, to the pleasure of

performing the rest of his morning's work as a task for her.

But his annoyances on the subject of the accident were not yet at an end. Poor people have as decided opinions as richer ones, and almost more decided prejudices, and are terribly tenacious of what they consider their rights. Mrs. Jackson, the mother of the girl Edith was chiefly interested in, was a fine specimen of her class. Her keenness in detecting a wrong was only equalled by the fostering tenderness of her cherishing of it. Her daughter was the worst injured—that was a distinction—yet Dr. Fane had not dressed her wounds himself; this was the first slight; and the second was that he had not hastened along at an early hour this morning to rectify the mistakes Miss Romney had of necessity made. Both omissions were of a nature to rouse the mother's finest wrath and indignation; and only the fact that Dr. Fane's services would be paid for by Mr. Chutterworth had prevented her showing her sense of his unpardonable neglect by calling in Mr. Garthorpe.

All this, with infinite richness of variation, and warmth of expression, was poured into the doctor's ear as soon as he entered the house of the outraged matron. Fane was very human. He had endured much that day, with, if not a

smile, at least with outward courtesy; but the bonds of conventionality do not press so tightly where the poor are concerned. He looked down at the prim-faced, angry woman, and swore with a calm, concentrated force of that morning's repressed irritation. It was not a violent exclamation, but there was a cold intensity about it that, as Mrs. Jackson said afterwards, made her blood curdle.

"I came to see how your daughter is," he said. "When I've done that you may send for every doctor in the town."

"You must excuse me being a bit put out, sir," faltered Mrs. Jackson.

"Where is she? Show me her room," and he followed her up-stairs.

Mrs. Jackson was quelled. She could only look on, hoping that now, at any rate, Dr. Fane would alter everything Miss Romney had done. She had, indeed, struggled with a strong temptation to undo everything herself, but some good angel that watches over the foolish and ignorant had restrained her.

Fane almost enjoyed the rest of his call. Mary, his patient, had fallen in love with the lady who had dressed her wounds, with her beauty, her gentleness, and her kindness, and she spoke of this lady with a certain shy enthusiasm,

which made Fane love her. She said, sighing, she wished she could see the lady again. Fane glanced at Mrs. Jackson's lowering face, and decided that the wish could not be granted. He would not even undertake to repeat the wish to Miss Romney, and a moment's stir of warmth visited his heart as he realised again his power of seeing her, and speaking to her; by this time, however, the knowledge of that power had ceased to inspirit him, and a chill reaction followed at once.

"I should like to thank her," said Mary. "I couldn't yesterday—I was dazed."

"You was too bad to think of any one but yourself," put in the mother, sourly.

"I will thank her for you," said Fane, kindly, and in rather a low voice.

"Oh, will you—shall you see her, sir?"

"I—think not. But I will let Miss Romney know." Then he got up rather hastily, and bade her good-morning.

"Well, Mrs. Jackson, is it to be Mr. Garthorpe?" said he, smiling calmly upon the discouraged matron.

"Lor', sir! you shouldn't mind what I said in my temper! Mary shall have none but you, I promise you—so won't you just alter them bandages?"

He was quick to understand what the insinuating tone and request implied; but he only replied carelessly that they did not need changing so soon, and then departed.

The experiences of that morning were a sort of revelation to him of what Miss Romney must have endured the last six months. The effect upon himself was an aching, sickened, intolerable pity. He felt completely depressed and disheartened when he reached home, and strangely humbled. He had gained from her something he was nearly indifferent about, but what was so much to her!—to her every loss must have been peculiarly painful and important, for the prejudice causing them proved the existence of such vast and incessant opposition to her career. He had given up the idea of calling upon her by that time. He ought not to intrude upon her—he had been thoughtless, tactless, and selfish, when he had proposed doing so yesterday. He had done her enough harm; all he could do now was to save her the additional annoyance of seeing him. He would write a note to say how the patients were progressing, and send it by Walter that afternoon. He rose from his scarcely-touched luncheon, and walked away to the library to write the note at once.

But as soon as the "Dear Miss Romney"

stood out in firm, peculiar characters on the white paper, the pen faltered, and he gazed at the words. Her name suggested so vividly the picture of her as he had seen her yesterday, when she had looked so frankly at him after his apology, almost kindly, so earnest was her assurance. Yesterday he had looked into her eyes, had seen the whole sweet beautiful face, and spoken to her—touched her hand—to-day he held the power of doing the same: he was sure of seeing her this once, most probably it would be the last time, for she *must* be leaving Wanningster soon. He plunged the pen into the ink—his face was burning, his hand was trembling. What was he to say? He tried to gather his facts together, to remember the women's names, and the different cases; but he could only see her name on the sheet of paper, and think of her face. He had permission to enter her house, why should he not use it?—it was the first, and would be the last and only time—it meant so much to him, this seeing her once more, and he was not in the habit of denying himself any pleasure he wished for. He threw down the pen, tossed the sheet into the fire, and hastened up-stairs to dress.

The short winter afternoon was beginning to close in as he reached Princess Road, and for

the first time entered the gate of No. 20. His heart beat as if he were a lad of twenty as he pulled the bell.

Miss Romney was at home, and he was conducted up-stairs and into the drawing-room.

"Dr. Fane," announced Eliza, with unnecessary emphasis, and closed the door behind him.

From a low chair on the further side of the bright fire rose the tall, graceful figure, already so well-known to him, and Edith advanced, holding out her hand. "How do you do, Dr. Fane?" she said.

And he was looking straight into her grave, dark eyes, feeling the clasp of slender, warm fingers, for Edith's hand-shake was not of the limp, inert kind. He hardly knew how he acquitted himself. When her hand was withdrawn, he became aware of the presence of another person, a little old lady with grey hair, and worn, delicate features, whose bright eyes were fixed very intently upon himself. For the first time he was introduced to Miss Jacques, and received a very slight bow in acknowledgment. Then Edith laid her hand on a chair to push it a little forward, but Fane took it from her. It was further back than her own seat, and she



turned towards him sideways as they talked about the weather. Afternoon tea had been brought up just before his arrival, and he accepted the offer of a cup.

Miss Jacques, who had taken no part in the weather discussion, maintaining an unusual and dry silence, remarked, somewhat brusquely, "Then you are not one of those men who profess to despise the indulgence of afternoon tea?"

"It is too delightful an institution to be despised," replied he, conscious of being regarded with no favour by the bright-eyed old lady who examined him so steadily.

"H'm!" said Miss Jacques. "Then, my dear, I have courage to venture on a second cup."

Fane rose and handed her cup to Edith, who smiled as she took it. Standing near while she filled it, he could see her face more distinctly in the fading light. She looked paler, more worn, than she had looked yesterday, or else the light made him fancy so; there were very dark shadows below her eyes, and the compression of suffering about her mouth; her movements were languid, and her hands were thin.

"She looks ill," thought he.

Edith glanced up as she held out Miss

Jacques's cup, and met a pair of startled eyes fixed upon her. She looked easily from them as she answered a remark of Miss Jacques's, merely supposing Dr. Fane was rather curious about her on account of her profession. She would not make any inquiry about the factory patients, that was too like a hint for him to discharge his errand, and she was anxious to make his call appear as much as possible like an ordinary call; but that look of his strongly tempted her to open the subject.

Fane, however, plunged abruptly into it himself. In a business-like fashion he retailed the news he had gathered that morning.

Edith asked a few questions about Mary: were her circumstances fairly comfortable?—would she have all she needed?

As he assured her on these points, and repeated the girl's message of thanks, he felt tempted to tell her about Mary's fancy to see her again. But he controlled the impulse, and held his peace. He would certainly not put her in the way of being insulted by that odious Mrs. Jackson, and he mentally set his teeth as he thought of it.

"And how is Mr. Chutterworth?" asked Miss Jacques.

Fane half laughed. "Sadly discomposed. He

is nursing plans of deadly vengeance against the doer of the mischief. Fortunately for the culprit—if there is one, and if he is found—the law will have the punishment of him, not Mr. Chutterworth.”

“I can imagine Mr. Chutterworth’s state of mind,” said Miss Jaeques, “and style of conversation, too,” she added, with a little laugh. “By-the-by, how is this wonderful concert going on?”

“Very well, I believe,” said Fane. “The performers are making most strenuous exertions. They practise diligently.”

“Why, then we may expect something after all! Almost our money’s worth—not that I shall go. Are you going, Miss Romney?”

“No, I think not,” said Edith. “Miss Milward has pressed me to go, but I don’t think I shall.”

Fane rose to take leave.

“Thank you for bringing me word about those poor women,” said Edith, as they shook hands. “It is good of you to take so much trouble.”

He could only reply that it had been no trouble, but a pleasure. His voice was a little unsteady as he said so, taking, he was thinking, what was probably the last look at the pale, sad

face ; and when he bowed to Miss Jacques, he met the old lady's eyes fixed upon him with a puzzled expression in their hostile coldness. Evidently she could not understand his presence here.







